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BEETLE IN THE ANTHILL

Arkady and Boris Strugatsky



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Maxim Kammerer, a COMCON-2 Agent

At 13:17, the Excellency called me in. He didn't raise his head to look at me, so I only saw his bald skull, covered with pale old-age pigmentation spots. That meant a high degree of worry and displeasure. Not about anything I did though.

"Have a seat."

I sat down.

"We need to find a man," he said and suddenly stopped talking for a while. He wrinkled his forehead angrily, then snorted. You'd think he didn't like what he just said, whether it was the form or the content. The Excellency loves precise formulations.

"Who exactly?" I asked to get him out of his philological stupor.

"Lev V. Abalkin. A Progressor. Departed for Earth the day before yesterday from the polar station on Saraksh. Has not registered on Earth since. We need to find him."

He fell silent again and, for the first time since the beginning of our conversation, looked at me with his round, unnaturally green eyes. He clearly was worried, and I realized we are talking serious business.

A Progressor who neglected to register on Earth upon return is, strictly speaking, a rule-breaker, but he wouldn't be of interest to the Commission, not to mention the Excellency himself. Meanwhile, the Excellency was so obviously troubled that I had a feeling that he was about to lean back, sigh with a strange sort of relief, and say, "Never mind, I'll handle it myself." It's been known to happen. Rarely, but it has happened.

"There are reasons to believe," said the Excellency, "that Abalkin is hiding."

Fifteen or so years ago, I would greedily ask, "From whom?", but it's been fifteen years, so the times of greedy questions were long gone.

"Find him and let me know," the Excellency went on, "do not attempt to apprehend. Don't even contact him. Find him, observe, and report. No more no less."

I tried to make do with an understanding nod, but he looked at me so piercingly that I thought it best to repeat the order, slowly and thoughtfully.

"I must locate him, initiate observation and report to you. I must

not try apprehending him, nor be seen, nor initiate contact.”

“That’s right,” said the Excellency, “on to the next part.”

He reached into a side drawer of his desk, where a normal agent would keep a reference crystal library, and pulled out a bulky item, whose name I first recalled in Honti: *zakkurapia*, which literally translates as “document container.” Only when he put it on the desk in front of him and folded his long knobby fingers on top of it, I unwittingly uttered,

“Wow! A paper file...”

“Don’t get distracted,” the Excellency said severely. “Listen carefully. No one at the Commission knows that I have an interest in this man. Nor should they. So you will work alone. No help. Hand your entire group over to Claudius, and report directly to me. No exceptions.”

I must admit, that shook me up. This kind of thing simply didn’t happen. On Earth, I have not seen a secrecy level like this before. And, in all honesty, I could not imagine it was possible. So I allowed myself a stupid question.

“What do you mean, ‘no exceptions’?”

“No exceptions means no exceptions. There are a few more people aware of the situation, but since you’ll never meet them, for practical purposes only the two of us know about it. Needless to say, during the search you’ll have to speak to many people. Each time, use a cover. Make up a few by yourself. Without a cover, you will speak only to me.

“Yes, Excellency,” I replied humbly.

“Now,” he went on, “looks like you’ll have to start from his associations. All we know about them is here,” he tapped the file with his finger, “Not a lot, but it’s a starting point. Take it.”

I took the file. Another thing unseen on Earth in my lifetime. Covers of faded plastic held together by a metallic lock, and a bright red stamp on the front cover, *Lev V. Abalkin*. And below, for whatever reason, 07.

“Look, Excellency,” I said, “why in this format?”

“Because this is the only format these materials exist in,” he replied coldly. “By the way, I am not authorizing copying to crystal. Any other questions?”

Obviously, this wasn’t an invitation to ask more questions, just a small drop of poisonous sarcasm. At this stage, there were many questions, but asking them before reading through the file was

pointless. However, I still allowed myself two.

“Deadline?”

“Five days. No longer.”

No way I can make it in time, I thought.

“Can I be sure he is on Earth?”

“You can.”

I got up to leave, but he hasn't dismissed me yet. He stared up at me with his intent green eyes, and the pupils of his eyes were contracting and expanding, like a cat's. Of course he clearly saw that I am not happy with the assignment, that the assignment appears to be not just strange, but nonsensical to say the least. So he didn't want to let me go without saying something personal.

“Do you remember,” he started, “how on a planet named Saraksh, someone named Sikorski and nicknamed Wanderer was chasing a fast-running little bastard named Mak?”

I did remember.

“So,” said Wanderer (aka the Excellency), “back then, Sikorski didn't make it in time. Now you and I must make it. Because this time around, the planet isn't called Saraksh; it's Earth. And Lev Abalkin is far more than a fast-running little bastard.”

“Are you speaking in riddles, boss?” I said just to hide the sudden uneasiness.

“Get to work,” he said.

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A Few Things about

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Lev Abalkin the Progressor

Andrei and Sandro were waiting for me and were shocked to be told to report to Claudius. They even tried to argue, but my uneasiness wouldn't go away, so I barked at them, and they departed muttering grudgingly and casting apprehensive sideways looks at the file. Those looks raised a new and unexpected concern: where am I supposed to keep this monstrous "document container"? I sat behind my desk, put the file in front of me, and automatically glanced at the register. Seven messages over a quarter hour I spent with the Excellency. I must admit, it felt good to switch my office communication channel over to Claudius. Then, I got busy with the file.

Just as I expected, the file contained nothing but paper. Two hundred and seventy three numbered sheets of different color, quality, and wear. I haven't worked with paper for good twenty years now, and my first impulse was to stick this entire pile into a translator, but I quickly caught myself. It's on paper, so let it stay on paper. Whatever...

All sheets were inconveniently, but solidly, bound by a convoluted device with magnetic clasps, so I almost missed a very common radio card stuck under the top clasp. This was a radio message the Excellency received today, sixteen minutes before he called me in. The content was:

01.06 @ 13:01. From Elephant to Wanderer.

In response to your enquiry regarding Tristan dated 01.06 @ 31.05 @ 19:34, a message was received from the base commander of Saraksh-2.07:11: Quote: Huron (Abalkin, a cryptographer at the headquarters of the Island Empire's Fleet Group C) blown. On 28.05, Tristan (Loffenfeld, the base's outreach physician) flew out to give Huron a regular physical. Today, 29.05 @ 17:13, Huron returned to base on Tristan's bot. According to Huron, Tristan was captured and killed by counterintelligence of Group C. Trying to retrieve Tristan's body to deliver it to base, Huron exposed himself. Body retrieval failed. During escape, Huron was unharmed physically, but is nearing mental collapse. At his request, he is returning to Earth on board flight 611. End of quote.

Flight 611 arrived to Earth 30.05 @ 22:32. Abalkin has not contacted COMCON, nor has he registered on Earth or any of the

flight 611 stopovers (Pandora, Resort) as of 12:53 today. Elephant.

Hmm, Progressors... I'll be honest, I don't like Progressors, although I probably was a Progressor myself, back when the word was used only in theorizing. However, in my dislike of Progressors I am not original. The vast majority of Earth's population is incapable of understanding that there are situations precluding (excluding) compromise. I get them before they get me, and there's no time to figure out who's right. For a normal person from Earth, this sounds barbaric, and I understand that; that's how I was until I ended up on Saraksh. I remember this view of the world; any sentient being is *a priori* perceived as ethically equal, it doesn't make sense to ask if they are better or worse than you, even if their ethics and morals are different from yours.

It's not enough just to study theory and undergo a model conditioning. You have to walk through the twilight of morals on your own, see a few things with your own eyes, get your hide seriously burned and accumulate a few dozens of truly revolting memories to finally understand, and not just understand, but to fuse into your very view of the world, a once-trivial thought that there are sentient beings who are way, way worse than you will ever be. And only then do you develop the skill of dividing the world into "us" and "them", making quick decisions in dangerous situations. Only then do you become brave enough to act first and figure out the consequences later.

The core skill of a Progressor, I think, is the ability to separate friend from foe. That's why at home people view them with wary delight (or is it delightful wariness?) or even carefully hidden disgust. And there's nothing to be done about it. Everyone tolerates it; we do, they do. Because either we have Progressors or we stay out of extraterrestrial affairs. Luckily, though, we at COMCON-2 rarely get to deal with Progressors.

I re-read the radio message and carefully re-read it again. Strange... The Excellency enquired about a Tristan, aka Loffenfeld. In order to find out about this Tristan character, he got up at the crack of dawn himself and had no qualms about waking up Elephant, who, as everyone knows, goes to bed at dawn...

Another strange thing: it looks like he knew what the answer would be. It only took him a quarter of an hour to make the decision to find Abalkin and put the file together for me. You'd think he

already had the file handy...

And the strangest of all: granted, Abalkin is the last man to see Tristan alive or dead, but if the Excellency needs Abalkin only as a witness in Tristan's case, why tell me the ominous parable of one Wanderer and one young bastard?

Oh, but of course I had theories. Twenty theories. And among them, like a blinding diamond, shone one: Huron-Abalkin has been recruited by the imperial intelligence, so he kills Tristan-Loffenfeld and disappears to Earth with the goal of inserting himself into the World Council...

I re-read the radio message yet again and then put it aside. Enough. On to page one. Lev V. Abalkin. Code number is such and such, genetic code is such and such. Born 6 October 38. Upbringing: boarding school #421, Syktyvkar. Teacher: Sergei P. Fedoseyev. Education: Progressor School #3 (Europe). Mentor: Ernst-Julius Horn. Professional aptitudes: animal psychology, theater, ethic linguistics. Professional indications: animal psychology, theoretical xenology. Career: February 58 through September 58, pre-graduation internship, planet Saraksh, contact with the race of Bigheads in their natural environment.

I stopped. Wait a minute! I probably met him! That's right, back in 58. There was a whole group of them: Komov, Rawlingson, Martha... And that sullen-looking intern. The Excellency (back then known as Wanderer) told me to drop everything and get them over the Blue Snake disguised as a Department of Science expedition... A tall guy with pale face and long straight dark hair, like a Native American's. That's right! They all (except Komov, of course) called him Leo the Siren, or just Siren, because his voice was so deep and roaring, just like a tahorg. Small world! OK, let's see what became of him.

March 60 through July 62, planet Saraksh, leader of Operation Man and Bigheads. July 62 through June 63, planet Pandora, leader of Operation Bighead in Space. June 63, planet Hope, participating, jointly with Bighead Schekn, in Operation Dead World. September 63 through August 64, planet Pandora, retraining. August 64 through November 66, planet Giganda, first insertion – junior accountant in hunting dog kennels, dog handler in the household of Marshal Nagon-Gig, jegermeister to the Duke of Alai (see page 66). I looked at page 66. It turned out to be a scrap of paper, torn out of something and still showing traces of crumpling. Written on it in

sprawling longhand was: *Rudi, Don't worry. By God's omission, two of our twins met on Giganda. I assure you, it was completely random and had no consequences. If you don't believe me, look into 07 and 11.*

Measures have already been taken. Illegible, but very ornate, signature. The word "completely" was underlined three times. On the reverse side of the scrap of paper, printed text in Arabic.

I caught myself scratching my head and went back to page one.

November 66 through September 67, planet Pandora, retraining.

September 67 through December 70, planet Saraksh, insertion into the Republic of Honti: underground unionist, establishing contacts with agents of the Island Empire (first stage of Operation

Headquarters). December 70, planet Saraksh, Island Empire: inmate in a concentration camp (no contact until March 71), interpreter for concentration camp administration, private in a construction unit, private first class in the coast guard, interpreter for the coast guard detachment headquarters, interpreter/cryptographer on the flagship of the Second Submarine Fleet of Group C, cryptographer at the headquarters of Group C. Observing physicians: Yadviga Lekanova (38 through 53), Romuald Crecescu (53 through 60), Kurt Loffenfeld (since 60).

That's it for page one. On the reverse side, though, was a large glyph, painted in washed-out brown (looks like gouache) and resembling a stylized Russian letter "Zhe".

Oh well, Lev Abalkin, Leo the Siren, now I know something about you. Now I can start looking for you. I know who your teacher is. I know who your mentor is. I know who your physicians are. What I don't know, however, is who needs this page one and why. If someone needed to know who Lev Abalkin is, they could call up information (I called up GWI, the Great Worldwide Informatorium), punch in his name or code number (I punched in the code number) and in (one-and-two-and-three-and) four seconds they would find out everything they are allowed to know about a stranger.

Here you go. Lev Abalkin, code number, genetic code, date of birth, parents (by the way, why are they not mentioned on page one?):

Stella Abalkina and Vyacheslav Tsurupa, boarding school in Syktyvkar, teacher, Progressor school, mentor... Everything matches. Since 60, Progressor on planet Saraksh. Hmm, not a lot, just the bare official minimum. Looks like he decided not to trouble himself with updating his GWI record... Now what's this? "Address: not registered on Earth."

I punched in a new query: at what addresses has this code number registered on Earth? Two seconds later, a reply: Abalkin's last address on Earth was Progressor School #3 (Europe). Another curious detail; either Abalkin has not been on Earth for the last eighteen years or he is a loner who never registers and wishes to share no information about himself. Both are imaginable, but very atypical...

As everyone knows, the GWI contains only information that people want to report about themselves. And what is on page one? I see absolutely nothing that Abalkin would have reasons to hide. A lot more detail, but no one would look for details of this kind in GWI. Just ask COMCON-1, they'll tell you everything. And what COMCON doesn't know can be easily found out by rubbing shoulders with Progressors on Pandora, where they undergo reconditioning or simply relax on Diamond Beach at the feet of the largest sand dunes in the inhabited Cosmos.

All right, let's leave page one alone. In parentheses, let's note that we still have no idea why it is necessary, and especially why there is so much detail. And, speaking of details, why aren't the parents mentioned?

Well, that is probably none of my business. But why didn't he register with COMCON after returning to Earth? This could be explained by a mental breakdown. Disgust for the profession. A Progressor on the verge of a mental breakdown returns to his home planet where he hasn't been for at least eight years. Where would he go? In my opinion, going to one's mother in a state like this would be indecent. The teacher? Or the mentor? This is possible. This is highly probable. A shoulder to cry on. I know this from my own experience. And it's more likely to be the teacher than the mentor. The mentor is, in some sense, a colleague, and we have disgust for the profession on hand... Wait a minute... What's wrong with me? I looked at the clock. It took me thirty-four minutes to go over two documents. And I haven't even studied them, just took a look.

I suddenly realized that I am not interested in thinking about *how* I am going to find Abalkin. I am much more interested in understanding *why* he must be found. I immediately got angry with the Excellency, although simple logic suggested that if there was something to help me search, the boss would give it to me. And since he provided no explanation as to *why* Abalkin must be found,

the *why* must have no bearing on the *how*.

Immediately, I realized something else. To be precise, I didn't realize it, I felt it. To be even more precise, I simply began to suspect it. This bulky file, this abundance of paper, all this writing yellowed with time will give me nothing, except maybe a few more names and a huge number of new questions, completely unrelated to the question of *how*.

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Briefly on the Contents of the File

By 14:23, I have completed the inventory of the contents. Most documents, it appears, were handwritten by Abalkin himself. First of all, there was his report of participation in Operation Dead World on planet Hope. Seventy-six pages written in steady large longhand with very few corrections. I briefly looked through the pages. Abalkin was writing about how he and Bighead Schekn crossed an abandoned city in search of some object (I didn't catch exactly what that object was) and made contact with some of the remaining unfortunate locals.

Fifteen years ago, Hope and its cruel fate became a staple horror story on Earth, both as a dire warning to all inhabited worlds and as evidence of the most direct involvement of the Wanderers into the affairs of other civilizations. It is considered affirmatively proven that over the last century of its history, the inhabitants of Hope lost control over the development of technology and broke the environmental equilibrium beyond repair. The environment was destroyed. Industrial waste, along with the waste generated by desperate experiments undertaken to remedy the situation, trashed the planet so badly that the population acquired a variety of genetic diseases and was doomed to savagery and death. Gene structures went mad. As far as I know, no one here understands the mechanics of this madness yet. At any rate, none of our biologists was able to successfully model this process. Externally, it looked like drastic non-linear acceleration of aging of any complex organism. A human being would develop more or less normally until approximately twelve years of age, and then begin to quickly mature and even more quickly grow old. At sixteen, a person would look thirty-five. At nineteen, most people died of old age.

Needless to say, this civilization had no historical prospects, but then the Wanderers came into the picture. For the first time, as far as we know, they actively intervened in the events of another world. Now we consider it an established fact that they were able to relocate the vast majority of Hope's population through hyperspace tunnels, presumably to save them. Where the unfortunate billions of sick people were relocated, where they are now, and what become of them, we, of course, don't know, and it doesn't look like we're about to find out.

Abalkin participated only in the first stage of Operation Dead World, and his role was rather modest. Although there is another way to look at it; he was the first (and still the only) Earth Progressor to work in partnership with a sentient non-humanoid. Looking over the report, I found that Abalkin mentions quite a few names, but I had a feeling that the only one of importance for this case is Schekn. I knew that there was a Bighead mission on Earth, so it would make sense to find out if this Schekn is a member of it. Abalkin wrote about him with such affection that I wouldn't put it past him to go see the old buddy. By then, I already noted that Abalkin is good with animals; he spent a few years with the Bigheads, became a dog handler on Giganda, and all that... There was another report by Abalkin in the file, one of his operation on Giganda. The operation, in my opinion, was mundane; the jegermeister of His Highness the Duke of Alai was trying to get his poor relative a courier's job at a bank. Lev Abalkin was the jegermeister, and the role of the poor relative was played by one Korney Yashmaa. The material looked completely useless for my purposes. Except Korney Yashmaa, as far as I could see from a quick glance, not a single Earth name was mentioned. The report was full of Zoggs, Nagon-Gigs, horse masters, highnesses, armor masters, conference directors, ladies in waiting... I made a note about this Korney, although it was clear that I probably won't need him. The second report contained twenty-four pages, and there were no other reports by Abalkin in the file. I thought it strange and decided that at some point I should think about why of all the numerous reports written by a professional Progressor only two made it into the file 07. And why these two?

Both reports were executed in the "lab technician" style and, in my opinion, looked a lot like middle school essays about visiting with the grandparents during the summer break. Writing these reports is a pleasure, reading them, generally, is a torture. Psychologists entrenched in the headquarters require the reports to contain not so much the objective information about events and facts as the strictly subjective feelings, impressions, and stream of consciousness of the author. The style of the report ("lab technician", "general", "artist") is not chosen by the author; it is assigned to him based on some mysterious psychological considerations. Truly, there are lies, damn lies, and statistics, but dear friends, let us not forget psychology!

I am not a psychologist (not a professional one anyway), but I thought I might be able to extract from these reports something useful about Lev Abalkin's personality.

Looking through the file, I kept finding similar, almost identical (and, to me, completely incomprehensible) documents. They were bluish sheets of thick paper with green borders; in the top left corner, there was a stamped monogram depicting either a Chinese dragon or a pterodactyl. Written on every sheet in the now familiar sprawling longhand, sometimes with a stylus, sometimes with a felt-tip pen, and sometimes for whatever reason with an electrode pencil used in laboratories was "Tristan 777". Below, there would be a date and the same ornate signature. Based on dates, it looked like these sheets were added to the file since 60 about once every three months, so they accounted for a quarter of the file's contents. Twenty-two pages were devoted to Abalkin's correspondence with his superiors. This correspondence gave me some food for thought. In October 63, Abalkin sent a letter to COMCON-1, in which he humbly expressed his perplexity over the fact that Operation Bighead in Space was shut down without seeking his input, although the operation was developing successfully and had rich prospects.

I don't know what response Abalkin received, but in November 63, he wrote a desperate letter to Komov asking him to renew Operation Bighead in Space and, simultaneously, a very harsh letter to COMCON-1, in which he protested his reassignment for retraining. (Note to self: somehow, it was all done on paper, rather than in the usual fashion.)

As is evident from later events, the correspondence bore no fruit, and Abalkin went to work on Giganda. Three years later, in November 66, he wrote to COMCON from Pandora and asked to be reassigned to Saraksh to continue his work with Bigheads. This time, his request was granted, but only partially; he was reassigned to Saraksh, but not to the Blue Snake. Instead, he was sent to Honti to pose as an underground unionist.

While in retraining, he wrote to COMCON twice more, in February 67 and August 67 (first to Bader, then to Gorbovsky himself), pointing out the wastefulness of using him, an expert on Bigheads, as a resident agent. The tone of his letters was becoming progressively harsher; his letter to Gorbovsky, in my opinion, was downright insulting. I would be curious to find out what ever-so-

gentle Mr. Gorbovsky replied to this outburst of rage and resentful indignation.

While resident in Honti, in October 67, Abalkin sent his last letter to Komov, in which he laid out a comprehensive plan of intensifying contact with Bigheads, including exchange of permanent missions, Bigheads' participation in animal psychology research conducted on Earth and so on and so forth. I never followed this line of work closely, but it seemed to me that this plan has been accepted and is being carried out. If so, then we have a paradox: the plan is being carried out, while its initiator is stuck as a resident agent first in Honti, then in the Island Empire.

All in all, the correspondence left me with a painful impression. Granted, I am no expert in Bigheads, so it's possible that Abalkin's plan was completely trivial and using big words like "initiator" is unwarranted. But there's more to it! The guy is an animal psychologist by birth. "Professional aptitudes: animal psychology, theater, ethic linguistics. Professional indications: animal psychology, theoretical xenology." Nevertheless, he was made into a Progressor. There is, of course, a whole class of Progressors for whom animal psychology is their daily bread. For example, there are those who work with Leonidians or Bigheads. But no, they made him work with humanoids, be a resident agent, a soldier, even though for five years he was screaming, "What are you doing to me?" And then they are surprised he had a mental breakdown! Of course, being a Progressor requires an iron-clad, military-style discipline. A Progressor often has to do what COMCON orders rather than what he wants. That's why he is a Progressor. Perhaps, Abalkin the resident is much more valuable than Abalkin the animal psychologist. But there's still something wrong about this story, and I should probably discuss it with Gorbovsky or Komov... Whatever this Abalkin character did (and he probably did something), I seem to be on his side.

However, all of this has no bearing on my task.

I also noticed that three numbered pages were missing after Abalkin's first report, two, after his second report and two more, after his last letter to Komov. I decided to ignore it.

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Almost Everything about Possible Associations of Lev Abalkin

I put together a preliminary list of Lev Abalkin's possible associations on Earth, and it turned out to include only eighteen names. Practically, only six were of interest and I arranged them in order of decreasing (in my opinion, of course) likelihood of being visited by Lev Abalkin. Here is what it looked like:

Teacher, Sergei Fedoseyev

Mother, Stella Abalkina

Father, Vyacheslav Tsurupa

Mentor, Ernst-Julius Horn

Physician at the Progressor School, Romuald Crecescu

Physician at the boarding school, Yadviga Lekanova

The backup list included Korney Yashmaa, Bighead Schekn, Jacob Vanderhuse, and about five more people, mostly Progressors. As to the likes of Gorbovsky, Bader, and Komov, I wrote their names down as a pure formality. Talking to them was out of question; they'd see right through any cover, and a straight conversation was out of question even if they were to initiate it.

Within ten minutes, the informatorium provided me with the following discouraging information.

The parents of Lev Abalkin didn't exist. Not in the commonly understood sense of the word. It is possible they didn't exist at all. Forty-some years ago, Stella and Vyacheslav, along with other members of the Yormala Group, boarded a one-of-a-kind spaceship called Darkness and departed to submerge into the EN-200056 black hole. There was no communication to them, and, according to modern science, there couldn't be. Lev Abalkin, it turns out, was their posthumous child. Of course, the word "posthumous" in this context is not precise; it's possible his parents are still alive and will remain alive for millions of years in our perspective, but, looking at it from Earth, they were as good as dead. They had no children, and before leaving our Universe forever, they, as many couples faced with a similar situation before and after them, left at the Life Institute a mother's egg fertilized by a father's semen. When it became clear that the submerging was successful and they were not coming back, the egg was activated, and behold, into the world

comes Lev Abalkin, a posthumous child of living parents. At least now I understood why page one didn't mention the parents at all. Ernst-Julius Horn, Abalkin's mentor in the Progressor School, was no longer among the living. In 72, he died in a mountain climbing accident on Venus' Peak Strogov.

Dr. Romuald Crecescu was away on a planet called Lu, seemingly out of reach. I never even heard of such a planet, but since Crecescu was a Progressor, one would assume that the planet was inhabited. Curiously, the old (hundred and sixteen!) man left his last home address in the GWI with a comment, "my granddaughter and her husband will always be glad to receive any of my students at this address". It was to be assumed that the students loved their old man and visited him often. I have to keep that in mind.

With the other two, I got lucky.

Sergei Fedoseyev, Abalkin's teacher, led a healthy life on the shores of Lake Ayat in a house warningly named Mosquito Manor. He, too, was over hundred years old, and he seemed to be either very modest or very private, for he reported to the GWI nothing but his address. The rest of information was official: graduated from this and that, archaeologist, teacher. That's it. As they say, an apple doesn't fall far from an apple tree... Just like his student, Lev Abalkin. However, after I entered an additional query into the GWI, it turned out that Sergei Fedoseyev authored over thirty journal articles on archeology and participated in eight archaeological expeditions (all in North-West Asia) and three Eurasian teacher conferences. In addition, his home was a personal museum of regional importance dedicated to Paleolithic times in Northern Urals. So that's what he's like. I decided to contact him as soon as possible.

As to Yadviga Lekanova, I was in for a surprise. Pediatricians rarely change professions, so I was beginning to imagine an old lady, a God's dandelion, bent under the burden of the most precious experience in the world, cheerfully mincing around same old school in Syktyvkar. Mincing, schmincing, guess again! For a while, she indeed remained a pediatrician in Syktyvkar, but then retrained into an ethnologist. But that's not all; she worked consecutively in xenology, pathoxenology, comparative psychology, and levelometry, and in all these not-so-related disciplines she succeeded, judging by the number of works she published and the responsibilities of posts she held. Over the last quarter of century,

she worked at six different organizations and institutions, and now worked at the seventh, the Portable Institute of Earth Ethnology in the Amazon. She didn't have an address; those wanting to get in touch with her were advised to do so through the Institute's office in Manaus. Thank you very much, although it was doubtful that my client in his current state would consider dragging himself out to the pristine jungle to see her.

It was perfectly obvious that I had to start with the teacher. I tucked the file under my arm, got into the machine, and flew out to Lake Ayat.

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The Teacher of Lev Abalkin

Contrary to my misgivings, Mosquito Manor stood on top of a high cliff above the water, open to all winds, so there were no mosquitoes. The owner met me without surprise and cordially enough. We went to a veranda and sat down in wicker chairs beside an antique oval table holding a bowl of fresh raspberries, a pitcher of milk, and a few glasses.

I apologized for the intrusion for the second time, and again, my apology was accepted by a silent nod. He looked at me with calm expectation, indifferently; his face was largely immobile, although that's common among people who at hundred and some years of age retain the full clarity of the mind and the complete solidity of the body. His face was angular, brown with tan, barely wrinkled, with thick eyebrows sticking forward above the eyes like visors. Funny: his right eyebrow was as black as tar, while the left one was completely white, and I mean white, not gray.

I introduced myself and presented my cover. I was a journalist, animal psychologist by training, doing background research for a book on contacts between humans and Bigheads... And so on and so forth...

In all honesty, I was hoping that in the very beginning of my lies, I would be interrupted by an utterance, "Wait a minute! Lev came to see me literally yesterday!", but I wasn't interrupted and had to spit it all out, including the quasi-profound pontifications about how a creative personality is formed during childhood, childhood, you see, not teenage years, and of course not during adulthood... When I finally ran out of breath, the old man kept quiet for another minute and then suddenly asked, "Who are those Bigheads?"

I was genuinely surprised. It just turned out that Lev Abalkin failed to mention his success to his teacher! You really have to be a very introverted person to fail to boast to your teacher.

I enthusiastically explained that Bidheads are sentient Canidae from planet Saraksh, where they evolved due to radiation-induced mutations.

"Canidae? So they are dogs?"

"Yes. Sentient and dog-like. They have large heads, hence the name Bigheads."

"So Lev works with the dog-like... He finally got his wish..."

I objected that I had no idea what Lev does now, but twenty years ago he worked with Bigheads, and successfully so.

"He always loved animals," said Mr. Fedoseyev, "and I was convinced that he had to become an animal psychologist. When the placement committee sent him to the Progressor school, I protested as much as I could, but they didn't listen... Although it was complicated; perhaps if I didn't protest..."

He fell silent and poured me a glass of milk. Very, very reserved man. No utterances, nothing like, "Lev? Of course! Such a remarkable boy!" Of course, it's still possible he wasn't a remarkable boy...

"So what exactly do you need to learn from me?" he asked.

"Everything!" I replied quickly. "What was he like? What were his passions? Who were his friends? What was he known for at school? Anything you remember."

"Well," he said with no enthusiasm in his voice, "let me try."

Lev Abalkin was an introverted boy. Since very early childhood. This was the first thing one noticed about him. This said, it wasn't the introversion of someone feeling inferior or insecure. Rather, it was the introversion of someone who is always busy. It was like he didn't want to spend time with people around him, as if he was always deeply involved with a world of his own. It seemed that this world consisted of himself and everything alive around him, excluding humans. This is not so rare among children, he just had a talent in this. The amazing part was that in spite of all his introversion, he willingly and joyfully performed in all sorts of competitions and in the school theater, especially in the theater. However, only solo. He vehemently refused to participate in plays. Usually, he recited and even sang with inspiration, with unusual glitter in his eyes; he seemed to open up on stage, but after getting off stage, he became his usual self, noncommittal, silent, unapproachable. That's how he was not only with his teacher, but with other children as well, and no one ever found out the reason. One could assume that his talent in communicating with nature was so far above his other capabilities that other children (and people in general) were simply uninteresting to him. Of course, it was much more complicated; his introversion, his concentration on his personal world was induced by thousands of small events, many of which remained unseen by the teacher. The teacher recalled a story: after a pouring rain, Lev walked around the park, collecting

earthworms on walkways and throwing them back into the grass. Kids thought it was funny, and there were a few among them who didn't just laugh, but made cruel jokes. Without a word, the teacher joined little Lev in his endeavor...

"But I'm afraid he didn't believe me. I don't think I convinced him that I really cared about the worms. And he had another noticeable quality, an absolute honesty. I can't remember one time when he would lie. Even at an age when children lie willingly and nonsensically, just because it feels good. And he didn't. And moreover, he despised those who did. I suspect there was a moment in his life when he realized, for the first time, with horror, that people are capable of saying things that aren't true. And I missed that moment, too... Although this is probably not something you are looking for. You want to find out how the future animal psychologist was hatching in him..."

And he proceeded to telling me how the future animal psychologist was hatching in Lev Abalkin.

I listened with an intent expression on my face, interjecting with an "Oh, really?" when appropriate, and even allowed myself a slight vulgarity, "Damn, this is exactly what I need!" Sometimes, I really don't like my job.

Then I asked,

"He didn't have a lot of friends, did he?"

"He didn't have any. I haven't seen him since graduation, but other kids from his group told me they don't see him either. It's awkward for them to talk about it, but as I see it, he simply avoids get-togethers."

Then, suddenly, it all broke through.

"Why, why are you so interested in Lev? I brought up one hundred and seventy-two people. Why of all of them you need Lev alone? Please understand, I don't think of him as my student! I can't! He is my failure! My only failure! Since day one, for ten years, I tried to establish contact with him, to bind us with a thread. I thought about him ten times more than about any other student. I turned myself inside out, but anything I tried would do more harm than good..."

"Wait a minute!" I said. "What are you talking about? Abalkin is a great expert, a world-class researcher, I met him..."

"And what did think of him?"

"A great guy, an enthusiast... That was the first expedition to study

the Bigheads. Everyone valued him, Komov himself had high hopes for him... And those hopes did come true, mind you!"

"I have great raspberries," he said, "the earliest-ripening raspberries in the region. Try them, do me a favor..."

I stopped talking and accepted a saucer full of raspberries.

"The Bigheads..." he said bitterly. "Maybe. But you see, I know that he is talented. Only there is no work of mine in it.

For some time, we silently ate raspberries and drank milk. I felt that he is about to change the topic. He clearly wasn't going to talk about Lev Abalkin anymore, and common courtesy required that he ask me something about me. I quickly said,

"Thank you so much! You gave me a lot of interesting material. Too bad he didn't have any friends. I really wanted to find a friend of his."

"If you want, I can give you some names of his classmates..." He fell silent, and then suddenly said, "You know what? Try finding Maya Glumova."

The expression on his face startled me. It was completely impossible to imagine what he just recalled, what associations it brought about, but you could say for sure that they were of the most unpleasant sort. Even his complexion changed to grayish-brown.

"A classmate of his?" I asked, just to conceal the awkwardness.

"No," he said. "Well, she did go to our school. If memory serves, she became a historian."

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A Small Incident with Dr. Lekanova

At 19:13, I returned to my office and started searching for Maya Glumova. In less than five minutes, her information card was in front of me.

Maya T. Glumova was three years younger than Lev Abalkin. After school, she completed the training program for COMCON-1 support staff and immediately after that participated in the infamous Operation Ark. Then, she entered Sorbonne to study history. First, she specialized on the early period of the First Scientific Revolution, then, on early space research. She had a son, Toivo Glumov, eleven years old; she neglected to mention a husband. Currently (miracles never cease!), she worked for the Special Collections Department at the Museum of Extraterrestrial Cultures, which was located three blocks away, on Star Square. And she lived pretty close by, too, on Spruce Alley.

I immediately called her. When the screen came on, on it was a serious-looking blond boy with sunburned skin peeling off his nose and a lot of freckles on his cheeks. No doubt, that was Toivo Glumov junior. Looking at me with his transparent Nordic eyes, he explained that mother wasn't home. She was going to be home tonight, but then called and said she was going somewhere overnight and will go straight to work tomorrow. Was there a message for her? I said there was no message and said goodbye. All right. I'll have to wait until morning, and in the morning, she would take a few minutes to remember who Lev Abalkin was and when she does, she would sigh and say she hasn't heard anything about him for twenty-five years now.

Oh well. There was still one more person on my primary list, not that I would dare to put much hope in that person. After a twenty-five years of separation, people gladly see their parents, very often, their teachers, somewhat often, their schoolmates, but only in special cases (I would say, very special cases) do their trips down the memory lane lead them to their school physician. Especially considering that the physician in question is in an expedition to the middle of nowhere, on the other side of the planet, and the null-comm, if you believe the reports, works intermittently for the second day in a row due to fluctuations of the neutrino field. But I had nothing left. It was daytime in Manaus, and if there ever

was a good time to call, it was now.

I got lucky. Dr. Yadviga Lekanova was in the communications room and I was able to speak to her immediately, which was well above my expectations. Dr. Lekanova had a round face, both tan and ruddy, with cute dimples on the cheeks, and a formidable mane of completely silver hair. She had some barely noticeable, but very endearing speech impediment combined with deep velvety voice, which made one think, very inappropriately, that until quite recently, this lady could make anyone lose their head. And, seemingly, so she did.

I apologized, introduced myself, and presented my cover. She squinted, trying to remember, and pushed her sable-black eyebrows together.

“Lev Abalkin, Lev Abalkin... I’m sorry, what did you say your name was?”

“Maxim Kammerer.”

“I’m sorry, Maxim, I am not sure I understood you. Are you doing this independently or do you represent an organization?”

“Well, what should I tell you? I talked to a publishing house, they were interested...”

“But you personally, are you just a journalist or do you actually work somewhere? These days, journalism isn’t exactly a profession, is it?”

I respectfully giggled, meanwhile trying to decide what to do next.

“You see, Dr. Lekanova, this is kind of hard to say... My primary profession is... Well, I’d say, it’s Progressor... Although when I started, there wasn’t such profession yet. Until recently, I’ve been with COMCON. And even now, I am still sort of associated...”

“Left for private sector?” She was still smiling, but now something was missing from her smile. Something important and yet very common.

“You know, Maxim,” she said, “I will gladly talk to you about Lev Abalkin, but not right now, if you don’t mind. Let me call you back in an hour or hour and a half.”

She was still smiling, and now I understood what was missing from her smile. It was common friendliness.

“Of course,” I said. “Whenever it is convenient for you.”

“Please accept my sincere apologies.”

“No, it is I who must apologize...”

She wrote down my channel number and we ended the call. What

a strange conversation that was! As if she knew I was lying. I touched my ears. They were hot. Damn this job! All right, let's wait. It's quite possible I'll have to fly to Manaus, wherever that might be. I requested a report. Null-comm was still intermittent. I ordered a stratoflyer, opened the file and started to read Lev Abalkin's report of Operation Dead World.

Five or so pages in, there was a knock on the door, and then the Excellency stepped in. I got up.

We rarely see the Excellency not sitting behind his desk, so it's quite easy to forget how tall and bony he is. A perfectly white linen suit hung on him as it would on a hanger. He looked like a circus performer on stilts, although his moves were not at all angular or awkward.

"Sit down," he said, folded himself in half and lowered into the visitor chair.

I quickly sat down.

"Report."

I reported.

"Is that it?" he asked with an unpleasant expression.

"For now."

"That's bad."

"Is it, Excellency?" I said.

"It's bad! His mentor is dead. What about friends from school? I see you're not even planning to talk to them! What of classmates from the Progressor school?"

"I'm sorry, Excellency, he didn't seem to have any friends. At the boarding school anyway; as to Progressors..."

"Spare me the rationalizations. Check out everything. And don't get distracted. For example, what does his pediatrician have to do with it?"

"I am trying to check everything out," I said, beginning to get angry.

"You don't have time for stratoflyers. Get busy with archives, not flights."

"I'll look at the archives, too. I'll even look into this Bighead, Schekn. But I have my priorities. I don't think the pediatrician is a waste of time..."

"Be quiet for a second," he said, "and give me your list."

He took the list, studied it for a long time, wrinkling his nose every now and then. I'd bet my life he was staring at one of the lines

never taking his eyes off it. Then he gave the list back to me and said,

“Schekn is not a bad idea. I like your cover, too. The rest is bad. You accepted the idea that he didn’t have any friends. That is not right. Tristan was his friend, although there’s nothing about it in the file. So keep searching. And that woman... What’s her name? Glumova... That’s good, too. If they were in love, that’s a chance. But leave Lekanova alone. You don’t need her.

“But she’s going to call back anyway!”

“She won’t.”

I looked at him. His round green eyes weren’t blinking, and I realized that she won’t indeed.

“Look, Excellency,” I said, “don’t you think that I would work three times more productively if I knew what the deal is?”

I was sure he’s bark, “I don’t”. My question was purely rhetorical. I just wanted to show him that the air of secrecy around Lev Abalkin was noticeable and stood in my way.

But he said something else.

“I don’t know. I believe you wouldn’t. I can’t tell you anything anyway. And I don’t want to, either.”

“A secret of identity?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said, “a secret of identity”.

From a Report by Lev Abalkin

By ten o’clock, the marching order settles completely. We’re walking the middle of the street, Schekn is ahead on the axis of the route, I am behind and off to the left. The initial idea – keeping close to walls – had to be abandoned, since the sidewalks are filled with peeled-off pieces of drywall, broken bricks, shards of glass, rusty metal roofing, not to mention that twice already, crumbling ledges fell down almost on our heads without any discernible reason.

The weather is not changing; the sky is still cloudy, damp warm wind is blowing in gusts, flinging around assorted garbage, rippling stinking water standing still in black puddles. The hordes of mosquitoes assail, dissipate, and assail again. Waves of mosquitoes. Tornadoes of mosquitoes. Lots of rats around. I have no idea what

they eat in this stone desert. Snakes, maybe? Lots of snakes around, too, especially close to manholes, where they bunch together into tangled wriggling lumps. I have no idea what snakes eat here, either. Rats, maybe?

The city, clearly, has been abandoned a long time ago. The man we saw at the outskirts was obviously mentally unsound and wandered in by chance.

A message from Rem Zheltukhin's group: he hasn't seen anyone so far. He is delighted with his part of this dump and swears that soon he will determine the index of this civilization down to the second digit. I am trying to imagine the entirety of the dump: giant, endless, spanning over a half of this world. My mood goes sour, and I stop thinking about it.

My camouflage overalls are working poorly. Camouflage matching the background develops with a five-minute delay, and sometimes doesn't develop at all; instead, the overalls cover themselves with spots of beautifully clear spectral colors. Looks like there is something in this atmosphere that interferes with the chemistry of the overalls. Remote support abandoned all hope to debug the overalls remotely. They give me directions on how to adjust it in the field. I follow, and as a result my overalls are completely maladjusted.

A message from Espada's group. Looks like they landed a few kilometers off the mark due to fog, so they can see neither cultivated fields nor settlements observed from the orbit. They see ocean and the shore, a kilometer-wide band covered with a black crust, possibly solidified fuel oil. My mood goes sour again. Remote support people categorically protest when Espada decides to turn off camouflage. A short, but noisy argument erupts over the radio. Schekn grumpily comments, "The notorious human technology! Funny."

He is wearing no overalls and no heavy helmet with transformers, although all that was specially made for him. He refused, as usual, without explaining his reasons.

He is running along the half-erased lane separation line, with hind legs slightly off to one side, as our dogs do sometimes, plump, fluffy, with a huge round head turned slightly to the left, so that his left eye peers straight ahead and the right one looks sideways at me. He is paying no attention to snakes, nor to mosquitoes, but rats are of interest, but of a purely gastronomic nature. However, right

now he is full.

I think he already drew some conclusions about this city and possibly about this whole planet. He indifferently declined the idea to look around a remarkably well preserved town home in Block Seven; the house with its beauty and elegance seemed absolutely out of place among buildings stripped by time and overgrown with wild ivy. With disgust, he sniffed at two-meter wheels of a military armored vehicle, still reeking gasoline, half-buried under the rubble. Without any curiosity, he looked at the macabre dance of the local man mentioned earlier, who jumped at us, little bells on his clothing ringing, covered all over with colorful rags (or were they ribbons?) To all this strangeness, Schekn is indifferent; he somehow didn't want to separate it out of the background, although at the beginning, for the first few kilometers, he was clearly excited, kept looking for something, breaking the ranks in the process, tried to sniff something out, snorting and spitting, muttering something unintelligible in his language...

"Here's something new," I say.

It looks like an ion shower cabin; a cylinder about two meters tall and a meter in diameter, made of semi-translucent amber-like material. An oval door, as tall as the cylinder itself, open. Looks like this cabin used to stand up vertically; then, an explosive charge was detonated at its side, and now it is leaning to the side, so that the edge of its bottom lifted up along with a slab of asphalt and clay-like dirt attached to it. In any other respect, it is unharmed, although there was nothing to be harmed in the first place: inside, it was as empty as an empty glass.

"A glass," says Vanderhuse, "but with a door."

I dictate an interim report. He takes dictation, then asks:

"Any questions?"

"Two obvious ones; why was this thing put here and in whose way did it stand? Note that there are no wires or cables hooked to it.

Schekn, do you have questions?"

Schekn is more than indifferent; he is scratching an itch, with his rear turned towards the cabin.

"My people do not know these things," he pontificates, "my people are not interested in this." And starts scratching again, with a challenging look about him.

"That's it for me," I say to Vanderhuse, and Schekn immediately gets up and continues along the route.

His people, you see, are not interested in this, I think to myself walking behind him slightly off to the left. I want to smile, but I really shouldn't. Schekn hates those smiles; his sensitivity to the smallest nuances of human facial expressions is astounding. Strange; where did it come from? Their own faces (or is it muzzles?) are almost void of expressions, at least in human view. A common mutt has richer expressions. But he understands human smiles very well. Indeed the Bigheads understand more about humans than humans understand about the Bigheads. And I know why. They are sentient, so we feel awkward studying them. They, however, feel no such awkwardness. When we lived in their fortress, when they sheltered, watered, fed, and protected us, I would often find out that I have just been experimented upon. Martha complained to Komov about the same thing, and so did Rawlingson. Only Komov never complained; I think he is too ambitious for that. Tarascon, however, ended up running away. He moved to Pandora, where he happily studies those monstrous tahorgs... Why is Schekn so interested in Pandora? He kept putting off our departure from there. I'll need to check if it is true that a group of Bigheads has asked for transport to relocate to Pandora. "Schekn," I say, "would you like to live on Pandora?"

"No, I need to be with you."

He needs to be. The problem is, their language has only one modality. There is no difference between "need", "must", "want", or "can". When Schekn speaks Russian, he seems to choose between those words randomly. You can never tell what he means exactly. Maybe he wanted to say that he loves me, that he feels bad when I am not around, that he likes to be only with me. Or maybe that he has a duty to be with me and he intends to carry it out honorably, even though what he wants most is to prowl through the orange jungle, greedily listening to every sound, enjoying every smell, of which Pandora has plenty...

Like an undulating metallic ribbon, a huge snake starts to cross the street, then winds into a coil in front of Schekn and threateningly raises its rhombic head. Schekn doesn't even pause; a short casual swing of a front paw, and the rhombic head hits the sidewalk. He trots on, leaving behind a wriggling beheaded body.

And those silly people were afraid to let me go with Schekn! He's a first-class fighter, he's smart, he is absolutely fearless, inhumanly fearless as a matter of fact. But... There's always a "but", isn't

there? If I had to, I would fight for Schekn as I would for a human, as I would for myself. What about Schekn? I don't know. On Saraksh, they fought, killed, and died to protect me, but somehow, I always thought they were not fighting for me, their friend, but for some abstract, although very important, principle. I've been friends with Schekn for five years now; his feet were still webbed when we met, I taught him to speak the language and to use the Delivery Line. I was at his side when he got sick with his alien diseases, of which our physicians were not able to make any sense. I tolerated his bad manners, put up with his inconsiderate remarks, forgave him for doing things that I wouldn't forgive anyone else. And to this day, I still don't know what I mean to him...

A call from the ship. Vanderhuse reports that Rem Zheltukhin found a rifle in his dump. The information is trivial. Vanderhuse simply wants me to keep talking. He worries, a kind soul, when I remain silent for a long time. We talk nonsense.

Every time I get on a call, Schekn starts behaving like a dog, feeding, scratching, or looking for fleas. He knows full well I don't like it and puts together these demonstrations, as if to get back at me for breaking away from our loneliness for two.

It is beginning to drizzle. The street ahead is covered with gray misty haze. We pass Block Seventeen (the crossing street is paved with stone), walk by a rusty van on flat tires, then by a relatively well-preserved building with granite fronting and wrought iron latticework over first floor windows. To our left is a park separated from the street by a low stone fence.

As we pass the leaning arch of the gate, out of wet bushes, with noise and jingling of the bells, an odd-looking tall man in multi-colored clothes jumps on the fence.

He is thin as a skeleton, yellow-faced, hollow-cheeked and glassy-eyed. Wet tufts of red hair stick out this way and that, loose arms flail about frantically, and long legs ceaselessly jerk in dancing moves, so that from under his huge feet, fallen leaves and cement crumbles fly off to all sides.

From the neck down, he is encased in something that looks like tights with red, yellow, blue, and green checkers; the little bells sown onto his sleeves and pant legs keep jingling, his knobby fingers keep snapping producing an elaborate rhythm. A buffoon. A harlequin. His moves would be funny, if they didn't look so scary in this dead city under the gray drizzling rain in front of an overgrown

park that long since turned into a forest. No doubt it's a mental case. Another mental case.

For a moment, I think it's the same man we saw in the outskirts. But that one had ribbons and a fool's cap with a bell, was not so tall, and didn't look that emaciated. It's just that they both are colorful and crazy. It seems highly improbable that the first two locals we meet should both be crazy clowns.

"It's not dangerous," Schekn says.

"We have to help him," I say.

"Whatever you want. He'll be in the way."

I know full well he'll be in the way, but there's nothing to be done about it, and I start approaching the dancing buffoon, getting ready the tranquilizing suction cup.

"Danger behind!" Schekn says suddenly.

I abruptly turn. On the other side of the street, there's nothing special. Just a two-storey town home; traces of violet paint, false columns, not a single unbroken glass in the windows, tall front doors opening into the darkness beyond. Just a house, but Schekn is watching it in with the utmost concentration. He lowers his body, puts his head close to the ground, and raises his small triangular ears. I feel a cold tingling between my shoulder blades; he hasn't done that since we started our route. Behind us, the bells keep jingling, and suddenly it's quiet again, except for the rustling of the rain.

"Which window?" I ask.

"I don't know." Schekn slowly turns his heavy head left and right.

"It's not in a window. Do you want to check it out? But it's less intense now..." The heavy head slowly rises. "It's gone. Now it's the usual."

"What do you mean, the usual?"

"As it was since we started."

"Danger?"

"Yes. It was dangerous since the beginning, but the danger was weak. Right now, it got strong, then went back to the beginning."

"Is it people? Or an animal?"

"A lot of rage. Can't say."

I look back to the park. The crazy buffoon is gone, and nothing can be seen in the wet dense greenery.

Vanderhuse is worried sick. I dictate an interim report. Vanderhuse is afraid it was an ambush and the buffoon was supposed to distract

me. He just doesn't get it; if it were the case, the ambush would have been successful, because the buffoon did in fact distract me so I heard and saw nothing except him. Vanderhuse offers to send out a support group, but I decline. Our assignment is trivial and it is highly likely that we're going to be pulled off pretty soon anyway and reassigned to support someone else, probably Espada.

A message from Espada's group; he's been shot at. With tracer bullets. Looks like warning shots. Espada continues the route. So do we. Vanderhuse is agitated to the limit, he sounds downright doleful.

Looks like we're out of luck with our captain. Espada's captain is a Progressor. Zheltukhin's captain is a Progressor. And we've got Vanderhuse. That's perfectly justified, of course; Espada's is the contact group, Rem is the primary intelligence source, and Schekn and I are just walkabout scouts in an empty safe quadrant. An auxiliary group. But when something happens (and something always happens), we have only ourselves to count on. In the end, dear old Vanderhuse is a starship pilot, the most experienced there is. He is used to living by Instruction 06/3, "should signs of intelligent life be detected, take off *immediately*; if possible, destroy all traces of your stay." And here, we have warning shots, blatantly obvious lack of desire for contact, and no one is in a hurry to take off; moreover, they keep pushing on asking for trouble.

Houses keep getting taller and more luxurious. Shabby, moldy luxury. A long line of mismatched trucks parked on the left. Looks like traffic here was left-sided. Many trucks are open-bed; cargo beds are filled with household goods. Looks like evidence of mass evacuation, only why would it proceed toward downtown? To the port, perhaps?

Schekn suddenly stops and raises his triangular ears out of the thick hair on top of his head. We are very close to an intersection, the intersection is empty, and so is the street beyond, as far as the gray mist allows seeing.

"Stink," Schekn says. After a short pause, he adds, "Animals." Another pause. "Many. Coming here. From the left."

Now I can smell something, but it's just wet rust of the trucks. Suddenly, I hear the thumping of thousands of feet, yelps, muffled growls, puffing and snorting. Thousands of feet. Thousands of throats. A pack. I look around, looking for a building to hide in. "Damn," Schekn says. "Dogs."

And that same second, from a crossing street on the left, it started to flow. Dogs. Hundreds of dogs. Thousands. A dense flow of gray, yellow and black, stomping, puffing, emitting a sharp odor of wet dog. The head of the flow already disappeared in the crossing street to the right, but then a few creatures separate from the pack and turn our way. They are large and mangy, extremely lean, covered by clumpy hair. Shifty evil eyes, yellow fangs in salivating mouths. With high-pitched, as if lamenting, barks, they approach us, and not head-on, but along some elaborate arc, arching their backs and tucking their tails under their bellies.

“Get inside!” Vanderhuse is screaming. “Don’t just stand there! Get inside!”

I ask him to stop making noise. I reach into the pocket of my overall and put my hand on the scorcher’s handle. Schekn says,

“Don’t. I’ll handle it.”

He slowly waddles toward the gods. He is not assuming a battle position. He’s just walking.

“Schekn,” I say. “Let’s not get bogged down with this.”

“Let’s,” he replies without stopping.

I have no idea what he has in mind and follow him at a distance pointing to the ground with the scorcher held in the lowered hand. I have to increase the firing sector in case the entire dirty-yellow stream turns our way. Schekn keeps walking, but the dogs stopped. They back off, turning their sides to Schekn, arching their back even more and completely hiding their tails between their legs. When the closest one is about ten paces away, they suddenly run away with panic squeals and merge into the pack.

But Schekn keeps on walking. Straight on, along the divider line, waddling, as if the intersection before him were empty. I clench my teeth, raise the scorcher to the ready and shift my position to the divider line behind Schekn. The dirty-yellow stream is very close now.

Suddenly, there’s desperate squealing all over the intersection. The pack breaks ranks, getting out of the way. A few seconds later, there’s not a single dog in the cross street to the right, while the cross street to the left is filled with a wriggling mass of furry bodies, pushing paws and bared teeth.

We leave the intersection strewn with dirty clumps of dog hair, leaving the squealing hell behind. The intersection is still empty. The pack made a turn. Flowing around the line of trucks, it is now

moving away from us, towards the outskirts. Squealing and howling die down little by little; another minute, and everything is just the way it was, only busy patter of paws, clicking of claws, puffing and snorting. I take a deep breath and put the scorcher back in its holster. I got scared all right.

Vanderhuse starts screaming. We get an official reprimand, both of us, for insolence and immaturity. Generally, Schekn is very sensitive to reprimands, but now, whatever the reason, he isn't protesting. He only grumbles, "Tell him, there wasn't any risk," and then adds, "almost." I dictate the report of the incident. I have no idea what happened at the intersection, but Vanderhuse understands even less than I do. I evade his questions, stressing that the pack is now moving toward the ship.

"If they get close, scare them away with fire," I conclude.

We walk to the end of Block Twenty-Two, and I suddenly realize that the wildlife has disappeared off the street; not a single rat, not a single snake, even the frogs are gone. Did they all hide away because of the dogs, I wonder tentatively. No; that has to be Schekn.

Well into the fourth year of our acquaintance, I unexpectedly found out that Schekn speaks decent English. Around the same time, I learned that Schekn composes music – not symphonies, of course, but simple songs, very nice and absolutely enjoyable for an Earthman's ear. And now this...

"How did you figure out the fire thing?" he asks.

I get tense. What is this fire thing I supposedly just figured out?

"Depends on what kind of fire we're talking about," I shoot in the dark.

"You don't understand what I'm talking about? Or just don't want to talk about it?"

Fire, fire, I think feverishly. It feels like I am about to learn something important. If I don't hurry. If I say the right things. When did I talk about fire? That's right, "scare them away with fire"!

"Every child knows that animals are afraid of fire," I say, "that's how I figured it out. Was it that difficult?"

"I think it was," Schekn says grumpily, "you had no idea until now."

He stops talking and casting sideways looks at me. That's it for conversation. He's so smart, isn't he? He understands that I either didn't understand what happened or don't want to discuss it with

other people listening in. In either case, the conversation should be ended. So, I supposedly figured out the fire thing. In reality I haven't figured out anything, I just mentioned fire to Vanderhuse. And Schekn concluded that I figured something out. Fire, fire... Schekn, of course, didn't have any fire. Or maybe he did; only I didn't see it, but the dogs did. Whoa...

"Did you burn them?" I insinuate.

"Fire burns," Schekn replies dryly.

"Can any Bighead do this?"

"Only Earth people call us Bigheads. The Southern degenerates call us vampires. Around the estuary of the Blue Snake, we're called ghosts. On the Archipelago, *tzehu*... There's no equivalent in Russian. It means someone who lives underground and can subjugate and kill others with the power of his spirit.

"I see," I say.

It took me only five years to find out that my closest friend from whom I never hid a thing, can subjugate and kill others with the power of his spirit. Let's hope that "others" means only dogs, but who knows... Just five years of friendship. Damn, why does it sting me so badly?

Schekn catches bitterness in my voice, but interprets it in his own way.

"Don't be greedy," he says. "You have a lot we don't have and never will. You machines, you science..."

We step out to a square and immediately stop, because we see a cannon around the corner. It is to our left, low, as if pressing itself against the ground. A long barrel with a heavy blob of muzzle brake at the end, low and wide shield painted with camouflage zigzags, two halves of the metal frame set far apart, wheels with fat tires. Lots of shooting was done from this position, but that was a long, long time ago. Empty shells lying around have rusted through, the hooks on the frame cut through the asphalt and now there's grass growing around them, there's even a small tree growing by the left half-frame. The rusty breech is open, there's no scope, at the rear of the position there are rotten ammunition crates, all empty. The shooting went on to the last shell.

I look over the shield and see the target. Actually, first I see huge holes overgrown with ivy in a building's wall, and only then do I notice an architectural incongruity of sorts. Right in front of the building with holes, completely out of place, there is a small dim-

yellow pavilion, single-story, flat-roofed, and I can clearly see that it, not the larger building behind it, was the target. They shot straight at it from fifty meters away, almost point-blank. The gaping holes in the wall of the building behind are misses, although you'd think missing from this distance would be impossible. However, there aren't many misses, and you can't help but be amazed by the solidity of this unprepossessing yellow structure that took so many hits without turning into a pile of garbage.

The pavilion's location is very odd, and initially I think that it was moved by shelling, pushed onto the sidewalk and its corner almost driven into the wall of the building behind. That, of course, is not the case. The pavilion is standing right where it was put by some oddball architects, on a sidewalk, sticking out into the street, which undoubtedly should have been a traffic impediment.

Everything that happened here happened a long time ago, and the smells of fires and shooting have long since disappeared, but strangely, the air of the unknown artillerists' hate, rage, and madness still lingers.

I start dictating another interim report, while Schekn sits down, mutters peevishly casting sideways looks at me, "Humans... No doubt about it... Iron, fire, and ruins, it's always the same..." He seems to feel the air too, and probably more intensely than I do. He is probably thinking about his homeland, too; about the forests full of death machines, vast spaces burnt to ashes with only charred radioactive tree trunks sticking out of the ground, and the ground itself saturated with hate, fear, and death...

There's nothing we can do at this square anymore. Except maybe hypothesize and paint mental pictures one more horrible than the next. We keep walking, and I start thinking that during the periods of global catastrophes, civilizations show every bit of abomination that has accumulated in the society's gene pool over centuries.

There are many forms of this scum, and by looking at them, you can see how unwell the civilization was by the time of the collapse, because very different cataclysms – pandemics, world wars, or even geological disasters – throw up the same scum: hate, animal egotism, cruelty that seems justified at the time but in reality is unjustifiable...

A message from Espada: he made contact. Komov's order: all groups prepare translators for receiving linguistic data. I put my hand behind my back and click the switch on the portable translator...

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Maya Glumova, a Friend of Lev Abalkin's

I didn't call ahead to tell Maya Glumova I was coming; instead, I headed to Star Square at nine o'clock in the morning. There had been a light rain at dawn, and the museum building, a huge cube of unpolished marble, was wetly glistened in the sunshine. From a distance, I saw a small crowd in front of the building. When I came closer, I also heard a few exclamations of disappointment. It turned out the museum was closed to the public on the account of putting together a new exhibition. The crowd included mainly tourists, but there were also a few scholarly types who picked this day to come in and take a look at some of the exhibits. Those cared nothing about new exhibitions. You had to warn them in advance about administrative matters like this one. Now the day is wasted... The turmoil was exacerbated by robot cleaners which, seemingly, were not reprogrammed for the occasion, so they aimlessly wandered through the crowd, getting in everyone's way, dodging irritated kicks and causing eruptions of angry laugh by their vain attempts to come in through closed doors. When I figured out what's going on, I wasted no more time. I've been to this museum before, so I knew where the service entrance was. I walked around the building and took a shaded little alley to a wide low door, barely visible behind the wall of ivy. The plastic door with finishing imitating fumed oak was also locked. Another robot cleaner was waiting about. It looked hopeless and despondent; it lost a lot of battery charge overnight, but here, in the shade, it had no chance to recharge. I gently pushed it aside with my foot and knocked on the door. A hollow voice replied, "The Museum is temporarily closed due to renewal of the core exhibition. We apologize for the inconvenience. Please come see us in a week." "Massaraksh!" I said aloud, looking around in confusion. There was nobody around, only the robot busily whirled under my feet. It looked like it was going to clean my shoes. I pushed it aside and knocked at the door again. "The Museum-" the hollow voice started again, but suddenly stopped. The door opened.

“That’s better,” I said and came in.

The robot stayed outside.

“So?” I said to it. “Come in, will you?”

But it backed off, as if undecided; meanwhile, the door closed again.

Inside, there was a not very strong, but very particular, smell. I have noticed long ago that each museum has its own smell.

Zoological museums usually smell the strongest of all, but here it smelled too. The smell of extraterrestrial cultures, I suppose.

I stuck my head into the first door I found and saw two young women with molecular soldering guns doing something inside a contraption that looked like a giant coil of barbed wire. I asked where I could find Maya Glumova, was given detailed directions, and went on to wander around the halls of the Special Sector of Items of Unknown Purpose. Not a soul around; all the workers must be in the central halls redoing the core exhibition. Over here, however, there were nobody and nothing, except items of unknown purpose. Of those, however, there were plenty, and I began to suspect that their purpose will remain unknown forever and ever, amen.

I found Maya Glumova in her office doubling up as a workshop. When I entered, she looked up at me; a beautiful woman, great chestnut hair, large gray eyes, slightly turned-up nose, strong bare hands with long fingers, loose sleeveless blouse, blue with black and white stripes. Very attractive indeed. Above her right eyebrow, she had a small black mole.

She looked at me silently and absent-mindedly, as if looking through me rather than at me. The desk in front of her was empty, only her hands were on it, as if she put them there and forgot all about them.

“My apologies.” I said. “My name is Maxim Kammerer.”

“Okay, I’m listening...”

Her voice sounded absent-mindedly too, and she wasn’t telling the truth; she wasn’t listening. She didn’t want to hear or see me. She had something else on her mind. Any decent person in my shoes would apologize and quietly leave. But I couldn’t afford to be decent. I was an agent of COMCON-2 at work. So I didn’t apologize, nor did I leave; instead, I sat in the first chair I saw, put on a look of simple-minded friendliness, and asked, “What’s happening here today? They’re not letting anyone in...”

She seemed to be slightly surprised.

"They're not? Really?"

"Indeed; I barely made my way in through the service entrance."

"Um, okay... I'm sorry, who are you? And how can I help you?"

I repeated my name and proceeded to telling her my cover.

Suddenly, something amazing happened. As soon as I mentioned Lev Abalkin, she sort of woke up. Absent-mindedness was gone; she flushed and literally bored into me with her gray eyes. Yet she didn't say a word and listened to everything I had to say. She slowly raised her hands from the desk, interlaced her long fingers and rested her chin on them.

"Did you know him personally?" she asked.

I told her about the expedition to the estuary of the Blue Snake.

"And you're going to write about it all?"

"Sure thing," I said. "But this is too little."

"Too little for what?" she asked.

There was a strange expression on her face, as if she could barely contain laughter. Even her eyes started to glisten.

"You see," I began again, "I want to show how Abalkin became the expert he is, the best in his area. At the intersection of animal psychology and social psychology, his contribution was somewhat of a—"

"But he didn't get to become an expert in his area," she said. "They made him into a Progressor. They—"

It wasn't laughter she was trying to contain, it was tears. And now she couldn't do it anymore. She dropped her face into the palms of her hands and started sobbing. Oh my God! When women cry, it's terrible to begin with, but the worst part was, I didn't understand why she was crying. She cried violently, carelessly, like a child, her whole body shaking, and I just sat there like an idiot and didn't know what to do. I would get her a glass of water, but her office didn't have glasses, or water, or any substitutes; just shelves full of items of unknown purpose.

Meanwhile, she was still crying, tears flowing in streaks between her fingers and dripping onto the desk. She was heaving, sobbing, and talking as if thinking aloud, interrupting herself, without any order or purpose.

...He used to beat her up. Yes, he did! As soon as she showed character, he'd let her have it. He didn't care she was a girl and three years his junior; she belonged to him, and that was it. She

was his thing, something that belonged only to him. She became one right away, almost the day he first saw her. She was five, he was eight. He ran circles around her, shouting a rhyme he made up, "The beasts came in and stood by the door. They were shot and killed, who knows what for." Ten times over, twenty... She laughed, and he let her have it for the first time.

...To be his thing was beautiful, because he loved her. He never loved anyone else. Only her. To everyone else, he was indifferent. They didn't understand anything; they simply didn't know how. And he got up on stage, sang and recited, just for her. He said as much, "This was for you. Did you like it?" He did high jumping, for her. And dove to thirty-two meters deep, for her. And wrote poetry at night, also for her. He appreciated her, a thing of his own, and always wanted to be worthy of such a thing. And no one knew a thing about it. Until the last year, when his teacher found out...

...He had many other things, too. The whole forest around the school was his thing, a big one. Every bird, every squirrel, every frog in every ditch belonged to him. He controlled snakes, he started and ended wars between ant colonies, he knew how to heal the deer, and they all belonged to him, except the old moose named Rex, whom he recognized as equal, but then he had a row with him and told him to leave the forest and never come back...

...Stupid, stupid girl! She had it so good, but then she grew up and decided to get free. She told him in no uncertain terms that she no longer wished to be his thing. He beat her up, but she insisted, the damn fool she was. Then he beat her up again, cruelly and mercilessly, the way he beat up his wolves trying to get out of control. But she wasn't a wolf; she was more stubborn than all his wolves put together. Then he took out his knife, with a handle he made himself from a bone he found in the forest, and with a mad smile on his face, cut his arm open from palm to elbow. He stood in front of her with that mad smile, blood was gushing out of his arm, and he asked, "And now?" Before he fell over, she knew he was right. Always was, since the very beginning. But she, a stupid, stupid, stupid girl, didn't want to admit it.

...And when she came back from a break and his last year of school began, there was nothing. Something happened. They probably had him already. Or found out and were terrified. The damn intelligent cretins. He looked through her and turned away. And

never looked at her again. She didn't exist as far as he was concerned, just like all the others. He lost his thing and accepted the loss. When he started thinking about her again, everything was different. Life was no longer a mysterious forest in which he was the lord and she, his most valuable possession. They already started to transform him, he was almost a Progressor, well on his way into another world, where people betray and torture each other. It was easy to see that he had a firm footing on that path; that he turned out to be a good student, hardworking and capable. He wrote to her; she didn't write back. He called out to her; she didn't reply. He shouldn't have written or called; he should have come in person and beat her up, just like he used to, and then maybe everything would be back to the way it used to be. But he was no longer the lord. He became a common man, and there were plenty of common men around, so he stopped writing...

...His last letter, handwritten as usual (he only wrote longhand; no crystals or magnetic records, just longhand) came from over there, from beyond the Blue Snake. "The beasts came in and stood by the door," he wrote, "They were shot and killed, who knows what for." That was it; nothing else in that last letter...

...She was dumping it all out feverishly, sobbing and blowing her nose into crumpled lab napkins, and suddenly I realized something, and in about a second she said as much: she saw him yesterday. Last night, while I was calling her home and talking to the freckled Toivo, trying to get some information out of Yadviga, talking to the Excellency, lying on my bed at home reading through the report of Operation Dead World, she was with him, looking at him, listening to him, and something was happening between them, something that just made her cry on a stranger's shoulder.

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Maya Glumova and Kammerer the Journalist

Suddenly, she fell silent, as if coming to her senses, so I came to my senses too, only a few seconds before she did. I was at work. I had to work. I had to discharge my duties. Those musty, shaggy words. After all I just heard. Maybe I should forget the duties and do something for this woman to get her out of the swamp of her desperation. Could this be my real duty?

But I knew it wasn't. For many reasons. For starters, I don't know how to get people out of the swamp of their desperation. I don't even know how to begin with something like this. So most of all I wanted to just get up, apologize, and leave. But I wouldn't do that either, because I really need to know where they met and where he is now...

She suddenly asked again,
"Who are you?"

She asked the question in a coarse and dry voice, and her eyes now were dry and glistening, as if she were sick.

Until I came in, she was sitting in here all by herself, although there were plenty of colleagues around, some of whom could actually be her friends, and yet she was alone; perhaps someone did come in and tried to strike up a conversation, but she was still alone, because no one here knew anything about the man who filled her soul with this horrible desperation and burning, debilitating disappointment and whatever else it was that accumulated inside her since last night and now wanted out but couldn't find an exit. Then in come I and mention Lev Abalkin by name, as if opening up an unbearably painful abscess with a scalpel. That helped, and for a short time she felt a relief, was able to cry it all out, her mind was free again, and I stopped being a healer and became what I really was – a random stranger. And now she was beginning to understand that I couldn't be all that random; randomness doesn't work that way. You don't split up with someone you loved twenty years ago, know nothing about him for twenty years, not hear his name in twenty years, and then, twenty years later, see him again, spend together a night full of dread and bitterness, just to hear his name the next morning from a random stranger...

"Who are you?" she asked, her voice still coarse and dry.

"My name is Maxim Kammerer," I replied for the third time, with

an expression of extreme confusion on my face, “I am a journalist of sorts... But for God’s sake... It seems to be a bad time... You see, I am doing background research for a book on Lev Abalkin...”

“What is he doing here?”

She didn’t believe me. Perhaps she had a hunch that I am not looking for information about Lev Abalkin, but for Lev Abalkin himself. I had to adjust, quickly. So I adjusted.

“In what sense?” Kammerer the journalist asked, puzzled and even somewhat alarmed.

“Is he here on a mission?”

Kammerer the journalist was stunned.

“A mission? I’m not sure I understand...” Kammerer the journalist was pitiful. No doubt he wasn’t prepared for what just happened. He got himself into an awkward situation and had no idea how to extricate himself. Most of all, Kammerer the journalist wanted to run away. “I really... Please don’t think that... You can just assume I didn’t hear anything... I’ve forgotten everything already! I haven’t even been here! But if I can do something for you...”

Kammerer the journalist kept talking nonsense and was crimson with embarrassment. He was no longer sitting down. He was bending over the desk in an awkward pose and kept trying to reassuringly pat Maya on the arm. He probably looked fairly disgusting, but completely harmless and somewhat dumb.

“That’s my style, you see...” he mumbled trying to somehow justify his presence. “It might be questionable, I don’t know, but it always worked before... I start from the periphery; friends, coworkers... Teachers, of course... Mentors... And then, fully armed, so to speak, I proceed to the subject himself... I asked at COMCON and was told Abalkin was about to return to Earth... I talked to his teacher... To his physician... Then decided to talk to you... But it seems to be a bad time... I must apologize and apologize again. I am not blind, looks like it’s an unpleasant coincidence...”

Well, he convinced her, the awkward and somewhat dumb Kammerer the journalist. She leaned back in her chair and covered her face with a palm of her hand. Suspicions were gone, embarrassment woke up, fatigue swept over her.

“Yes,” she said, “a coincidence...”

Now Kammerer the journalist should have turned around and tiptoed out. But he wasn’t that kind of man. He couldn’t just leave behind an exhausted and upset woman who clearly needed help and

support.

“Of course, coincidence and nothing more...” he kept mumbling, “let’s just forget the whole thing, as if nothing happened... Later at some point, when you could... Would... I’d be very thankful... It’s not uncommon to talk to the subject first, and only then... Should I call someone? I’d quickly...”

She was silent.

“Well, if you don’t need anyone, and that’s all right, too. Let me just sit with you just in case...”

She finally took her hand off her face.

“You don’t have to sit with me,” she said wearily. “You should go see your subject.”

“No, no, no!” Kammerer the journalist protested. “There will be plenty of time for that. Subject or no subject, I don’t want to leave you alone. I have all the time in the world...” He looked at his watch with some concern. “The subject will still be there! I’ll catch up with him. I know how those Progressors are on vacation... He must be walking around town, giving in to sentimental memories...”

“He’s not in town,” Maya said, keeping her composure for the time being, “he’s a two-hour flight away...”

“A two-hour flight away?” Kammerer the journalist was unpleasantly surprised. “Wait a minute, I was under an impression-”

“He is on Valdai! At a resort called Aspen! On Lake Velye! And keep in mind, null-T isn’t working!”

“Hmm!” said Kammerer the journalist very loudly.

A two-hour trip by air definitely wasn’t in his plans for the rest of the day. One could even suspect that he is against air travel in principle.

“Two hours...” he started murmuring. “So, so, so... I imagined it would happen differently... Excuse me, but is there any way to contact him from here?”

“Probably,” Maya said, her voice fading away. “I don’t know the number. Look, Kammerer, let me be. Right now, I am useless to you anyway.”

Only now has Kammerer the journalist completely realized the awkwardness of his position. He got up and sprinted for the door. Suddenly remembered something, came back, mumbled unintelligible apologies. Sprinted for the door again, knocking over

a chair. Continuing to mumble apologies, put the chair back up very carefully, as if it were made of crystal glass and porcelain. Backed out, making small bows, pushed the door with his behind and got out into the hallway.

I carefully closed the door and for a few minutes, just stood there rubbing my face with the palm of my hand. I was so full of shame and self-loathing that I wanted to throw up.

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The Aspen. Dr. Goannek

From the eastern side of the lake, the Aspen looked like a scattering of white and red roofs sinking into the forest of rowan trees. There was also the narrow strip of a beach and a wooden pier, tied to which was a herd of differently colored boats. On the entire sunlit slope, not a soul was in sight. Only on the pier, a man dressed in white was seating at the edge dangling his feet, fishing.

I threw my clothes on the seat and quietly got into the water. The water in Lake Velye was good, clear and sweet, swimming in it was pure pleasure.

When I climbed onto the pier and started jumping on one foot trying to shake some water out of my ear, the man in white took his eyes off his fishing line and asked with interest

“So you’ve plodded all the way from Moscow with nothing but your swimming trunks on?”

Once again, it was an old man of hundred or so, dry and thin, just as his bamboo fishing pole, only his face wasn’t yellow, it was brown, not to say black. Or it could simply be the contrast between his complexion and his spotless white clothes. His eyes looked young though, small, blue, and cheerful. A blindingly white cap with a giant sun visor covered his (no doubt bald) head and made him look like either a retired jockey or a Twainian schoolboy skipping Sunday school.

“They say, there’s an insane amount of fish here,” I said squatting beside him.

“Lies,” he replied. Briefly and with conviction.

“They say, you could have a good time here,” I said.

“”Depends on who you are,” he said.

“They say, it’s a fashionable resort,” I said.

“Used to be,” he said.

I ran out of things to say. We stayed quite for a while.

“This resort, young man,” he said instructively, “was fashionable three seasons ago. Or, as my great-grandson Bryacheslav would say, three seasons in reverse. These days, young man, we can’t imagine a vacation without ice-cold water, blood-sucking insects, raw foods, and wild thickets. Taimyr or Baffin Island, as the case may be... Are you an astronaut? A Progressor? An ethnologist?”

“Used to be,” I said, not without malice in my voice.

“And I am a physician,” he said blithely. “I suppose you don’t need to see me, do you? For the last three seasons, I barely saw anyone. However, the experience shows that patients tend to show up in bunches. For example, I had to see someone yesterday. Why not see someone today, I ask? Are you sure you don’t need to see me?” “Only as a partner for a pleasant conversation,” I said sincerely. “Oh well, thank you for that,” he said with enthusiasm. “Then let’s go and have some tea.”

And we went to have tea.

Dr. Goannek lived in a large log house next door to a health clinic. The house had everything, including Russian-style carved wood decorations on the porch, around the windows, and on the gables, an ultrasound oven, and a two-level cellar, which, however, was connected to the Delivery Line. Behind the house, in the thicket of tall nettles, there was a null-T cabin skillfully disguised as an outhouse.

Doctor’s tea consisted of ice-cold beet soup, millet cereal with pumpkin, and fizzy kvas with raisins. Tea proper wasn’t present due to Dr. Goannek’s deep conviction that consumption of strong tea promotes the formation of kidney stones while weak tea is a culinary nonsense.

Dr. Goannek lived at the Aspen since he transferred his practice here twelve seasons ago. He saw it through the periods of mediocrity and a time of fantastic popularity, when for a time it was believed that only resorts located in temperate climate can make a vacationer truly happy. He hasn’t left it even now, it the time of what seemed to be a hopeless decline.

The current season, which, as usual, started in April, so far brought to the Aspen only three people.

In mid-May, there was a married couple, both toxic waste handlers, who just got out of the North Atlantic, where they were sifting through a huge pile of radioactive garbage. The couple (he, a Bantu, she, a Malay) wanted to go skiing, but got their hemispheres confused. After several days of long walks through surrounding forests, they disappeared in the middle of the night, and only a week later they sent him a message from the Falkland Islands with proper apologies.

Then, a very strange young man checked in unexpectedly yesterday early in the morning. Strange how? First, how did he get here? He didn’t use ground transportation, nor air transportation; Dr.

Goannek was positive about it due to the combination of insomnia and good hearing. He didn't walk here, either; Dr. Goannek could recognize a hiker by odor. Only null-T was left. But for the last few days, null-T was working intermittently due to neutrino field fluctuations, so getting to the Aspen by null-T was possible only by accident. However, if the young man got here by accident, why did he immediately come to see Dr. Goannek, as if he needed it all his life?

The last part seemed a little fuzzy to Kammerer the tourist traveling in swimming trunks, so Dr. Goannek was quick with explanations. The strange young man didn't need to see Dr. Goannek personally. He needed to see a physician, and the sooner the better. The young man was complaining of mental exhaustion, and the said exhaustion was quite obvious to an experienced physician. Dr. Goannek thought it best to administer a battery of tests, which, luckily, found no pathology. The impact of the pronouncement on the young man was truly remarkable. He literally bloomed in front of Dr. Goannek and in two or three hours was already receiving guests.

No, the guests arrived the most common way, in a standard glider. Actually, it was just one guest, a woman. That was a good idea; for a young man, there isn't and can't be a better therapy than the company of a charming young woman. In Dr. Goannek's immense experience, similar cases happened quite often. For example... (Dr. Goannek told a story.) Or, say... (Dr. Goannek told another story.) And as to young women, the best therapy for them is... (Dr. Goannek told stories three, four, and five.)

To keep up with appearances, Kammerer the tourist hastened to tell a story from his personal experience, when during his career as a Progressor he too was flirting with mental exhaustion, but his pitiful and uncharacteristic example was indignantly rejected by Dr. Goannek. With Progressors, it turns out, things are different. In some respects, dealing with their problems is more complicated, in others, it is much simpler. At any rate, Dr. Goannek wouldn't allow himself to treat the strange young man without a consultation with a specialist if the strange young man were a Progressor...

But the strange young man, surely, was no Progressor. In parentheses, he could never become one; his emotional type is not suitable for it. No, he wasn't a Progressor; he must have been a performer or an artist who recently experienced a major creative

disaster. And that wouldn't be the first (and not even the tenth) such case in Dr. Goannek's immense practice. If memory serves... And Dr. Goannek proceeded to spew out cases one more colorful than the next, while, of course, replacing the names with all kinds of Xs, betas, and even alphas...

Kammerer the tourist, a former Progressor and a somewhat rude man, interrupted the epic monologue and said that he would never agree to live in the same resort with a crazy artist. That was a poorly thought out remark, and Kammerer the tourist was immediately put in his place. For starters, his use of the word "crazy" was harshly criticized as medically ignorant and vulgar to boot. And only then did Dr. Goannek say in a voice full of toxic sarcasm that the said crazy artist, seemingly anticipating the invasion of former Progressor Kammerer and the related inconvenience, refused to share the resort with him and left in the morning by the first glider he could find. He was in such a hurry to avoid meeting Kammerer the tourist that he didn't even have time to say goodbye to Dr. Goannek.

Former Progressor Kammerer, however, turned out to be completely insensitive to verbal poison. He took it all literally and stated his complete satisfaction with the resort being free of mentally exhausted artists and the related opportunity to choose a good place to stay.

"Where did he live, that neurasthenic?" he asked and immediately clarified, "Just so that I don't take his lodgings accidentally."

By then, the conversation has moved out to the porch. The somewhat shocked doctor quietly pointed to a picturesque log cabin with a large number six written on it in blue; the cabin stood somewhat aside from other buildings, right at the edge of the cliff. "Excellent," Kammerer the tourist announced. "That's where we won't go. Let's check out the other side. I like the fact that the rowans are denser there..."

It was obvious that the ever sociable Dr. Goannek intended to offer his assistance as guide and advisor. However, Kammerer the tourist and former Progressor now seemed unceremonious and insensitive. "Of course," he said dryly. "You should take this path to cottage number twelve."

"What about you? Are you not coming?"

"No, I'm afraid not. I've grown used to resting in my hammock after tea..."

Without a doubt, a single doleful look would be enough for Dr. Goannek to change his mind and skip the habitual in the name of hospitality. So the insensitive and vulgar Kammerer quickly dealt the last blow.

“Damn age,” he said understandingly, and the dirty deed was done. Fuming with silent rage, Dr. Goannek went to his hammock, while I dove into the thicket of rowans, skirted the clinic, and walked up the slope towards the neurasthenic’s cabin.

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Inside Cabin Number Six

I thought it was clear that the Aspen will never see Lev Abalkin again and that I won't be able to find anything useful in his temporary lodgings. But two things were far from clear. Indeed, how did he get here and why? If he is really hiding, it would be both safer and more logical to go see a physician in any large city. For example, in Moscow, which was a ten-minute flight away, or even in Valdai, which was two minutes away. It is likely that he indeed got here by accident; either he ignored the warnings of neutrino storm or he didn't care where to go. He needed to see a physician, urgently. Why?

And another strange thing. Could an experienced centenarian physician be so clueless as to deem a professional Progressor unfit to be a Progressor? Hardly. Yet again, the issue of Lev Abalkin's professional orientation raises its head. It looks unprecedented. It's one thing to send to Progressor school someone whose professional indications are against it; it's totally something else to do it to a person with unsuitable emotional type. For this kind of thing, people should lose their jobs, permanently, for the likely outcome here is not just a waste of human energy, but human casualties... By the way, Tristan is already dead... I thought that later, after I find Lev Abalkin, I'll absolutely have to find the people who lit the fire under this strange brew.

As I expected, the door of Lev Abalkin's temporary home was not locked. The small front room was empty; sitting on a low round table was a toy panda nodding its head and shining its ruby eyes. I looked over to the right, into the bedroom. It looked like no one has been in there in two, if not three, years; even the automated lighting was not enabled. In the corner above the made bed, there were cobwebs with dead spiders in them.

I walked around the table into the kitchen. The kitchen has been used. On the table, there were dirty plates, the window of Delivery Line was open, and in the receiving chamber, there was an unclaimed package with a bunch of bananas in it. Did Lev Abalkin have a butler in the Group C headquarters? Or did he simply not know how to get a robot cleaner started?

The kitchen has somewhat prepared me for what I was about to see in the living room. Although barely. The entire floor was covered

with pieces of torn paper. The wide couch looked like a ravaged nest; cushions with flower print upholstery were out of place, one was on the floor in the far corner of the room. An arm chair was toppled over, on the table, there were containers with drying food and more dirty plates; in the middle of it all stood an open bottle of wine. Another bottle rolled off to the wall, leaving behind a sticky trail. There was one wineglass with some wine in it, but since the window curtain was torn and barely hung in place on the few remaining threads, I somehow started thinking that another wineglass was thrown out through the open window.

Crumpled paper was all over the place, not just on the floor, and it wasn't all crumpled. A few sheets were on the couch, torn pieces got into food containers; containers and plates seemed to have been shifted to one side to make room for a pile of paper.

I took a few careful steps, and immediately something sharp stuck into my bare foot. It was a piece of amber, shaped like a tooth with two roots. There was a hole drilled through it. I squatted, looked around, and found a few more pieces; the rest of the amber necklace was under the table, next to the couch.

Still squatting, I picked up the nearest piece of paper and smoothed it out on the carpet. It was half-sheet of common writing paper, on which someone drew a human face with a stylus. A child's face. A boy with puffy cheeks about twelve years old. Looks like an eternal complainer. The sketch was done with a few precise, confident lines. A very decent sketch. I suddenly thought that I may indeed be wrong and not Lev Abalkin, but some professional artist dealing with the aftermath of a creative disaster left this mess behind.

I picked up the paper, put the armchair back in place and sat in it. Again, it looked strange. Someone was quickly and assuredly sketching faces, mostly children's; animals, clearly from Earth; buildings, landscapes, even clouds. There were also several hand-drawn maps drafted by a professional topographer: groves, streams, swamps, crossroads, and in the middle of topographic signs, somehow, tiny human figures, sitting, lying down, running, and equally tiny pictures of animals (deer? wolves? dogs?), some of them crossed out for whatever reason.

This was all weird and looked nothing like an Imperial officer who didn't go through reconditioning. One of the sheets was a well-done portrait of Maya Glumova, and I was amazed by the artist's capture of the confused or perplexed expression on her otherwise cheerful

face. There was also a caricature of the teacher, Sergey Fedoseyev, and a great one, too; that's definitely what he looked like a quarter-century ago. When I saw the caricature, I realized what the buildings in the sketches were; a quarter-century ago, that was the architectural style commonly used in Eurasian boarding schools... And all of that was sketched quickly, precisely, confidently, and almost immediately torn up, crumpled, and discarded.

I put the papers away and looked around again. A piece of blue cloth lying under the table attracted my attention. I picked it up. It was a woman's handkerchief, crumpled and torn up. I, of course, immediately thought about the Akutagawa's short story and imagined how Maya sat in this very chair in front of Lev Abalkin, looked at him, listened to him, and there was a smile on her face, with only a slight shadow of confusion or perplexity, and under the table, her hands were mercilessly tearing apart the handkerchief... I could see Maya Glumova, but I could not imagine what she saw and heard. The sketches were somehow important. Were it not for them, I would easily see a common Imperial officer who just returned from the barracks and was enjoying some well-deserved rest on the ravaged couch. But the sketches were here, and something very important, very complicated, and very dark was hiding behind them...

I had nothing else to do here. I walked to the videophone and dialed the number for the Excellency.

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The Excellency's Unexpected Reaction

He listened to me without interrupting, which in and of itself was a bad sign. I tried to console myself by thinking his displeasure has nothing to do with me, that it is caused by something else. He listened to everything I had to say, then said gloomily,

"You didn't do too well with Glumova."

"I was bound by the cover," I said dryly.

He didn't argue.

"What do you plan to do next?" he asked.

"I think he's not coming back here."

"I think so too. Will he want to see Glumova again?"

"Hard to say. Actually, I can't say one way or another. I just don't understand what's going on. But there's still a chance."

"In your opinion, why did he want to see her?"

"That's exactly what I don't understand, Excellency. It looks like they went over their love and their memories here. Only love wasn't exactly love and memories weren't just memories.

Otherwise, Glumova wouldn't be in the state she was in. Of course, if he got really drunk, he could have offended her somehow... Especially considering their strange childhood relationship...

"Don't exaggerate," the Excellency grumbled, "they are not children anymore. Here's a question: if he calls her again or comes to see her, would she want to see him?"

"I don't know," I said. "Most likely, she would. He still means a lot to her. She wouldn't be so desperate over a man she feels indifferent about."

"That's romance novel stuff," the Excellency grumbled and suddenly switched to yelling, "You had to find out why he wanted to see her! What they talked about! What he told her!"

I got angry.

"I couldn't find out any of that," I said. "She was hysterical, and when she came to her senses, sitting in front of her was an idiot journalist with an inch-thick hide..."

He interrupted,

"You'll have to see her again."

"Then allow me to change my cover!"

"What have you got in mind?"

"Let's see... I work for COMCON. On a faraway planet, there was an accident. Lev Abalkin is a witness. But witnessing it shook him

up so badly that he escaped to Earth and doesn't want to see anyone. Mental damage on the verge of mental illness. We are looking for him to find out what happened there..."

The Excellency was silent; he clearly disliked my idea. For a while, I was watching his unhappy freckled bald spot filling up the screen, then said, trying to control myself,

"Look, Excellency, we can no longer lie the way we did so far. She had enough time to figure out my appearance wasn't an accident. I assured her it was, but if I come see her again under the same guise, it would be a challenge to the common sense! She may still believe I am a journalist, in which case she has nothing else to tell me, so she would just tell the insensitive idiot to go to hell. Or she doesn't, in which case she would tell me to go to hell without having to explain the reason. That's what I would do anyway. Now, if I represent COMCON, I have the right to ask, and I will try to formulate the questions so that they can be answered."

In my opinion, this sounded logical enough. I couldn't think of any other way anyhow. At any rate, I won't go see her as an idiot journalist again. In the end, it is up to the Excellency to decide what's more important, to find a man or to keep the search discreet. Without looking up, he asked,

"Why did you go to the museum this morning?"

I was surprised.

"What do you mean, why? To see Glumova..."

He slowly lifted his head up, and I saw his eyes. His pupils were almost as large as his irises. I even instinctively moved away from the screen. It was obvious I just said something awful. I started blurting out like a child,

"She works there, doesn't she? Where else was I supposed to go to see her? I couldn't catch her at home..."

"Glumova works at the Museum of Extraterrestrial Cultures?" he asked, carefully articulating each word.

"Yes, why?"

"At the Special Sector of Items of Unknown Purpose..." he said quietly. I wasn't sure if it was a question or a statement. I saw the left corner of his thin-lipped mouth move left and down, and chills started running up and down my spine.

"Yes," I whispered.

I could no longer see his eyes; the gleaming bald spots filled up the screen again.

“Excellency...”

“Be quiet!” he barked. We stayed silent for a long while.

“So,” he finally said in his usual tone. “Go home. Stay there and don’t go anywhere. I may need you any moment. But most likely, during the night. How much time do you need to get back?”

“Two and a half hours.”

“Why so long?”

“I have to swim back across the lake.”

“Okay. Get back home and report to me. Hurry.”

The screen went blank.

From a Report by Lev Abalkin

It starts raining harder again, the fog gets even thicker, so the buildings on both sides of the street are almost impossible to see from its middle. Remote support goes into panic; they think bio-optical transformers are going down. I calm them down. They calm down, but then get insolent and start bugging me about turning on the anti-fog projector. I turn it on just for them. Remote support get excited, but Schekn sits down on his tail in the middle of the street and says that he wouldn't take another step until someone gets rid of this stupid rainbow, which makes his ears hurt and his paws itch between the toes. He, Schekn, sees everything perfectly well without those absurd projectors, and if remote support people can't see something, it's only because they don't need to see it. Instead, they should go do something useful, for example make Schekn's favorite oatmeal stew with beans in anticipation of his return. Indignation erupts. Actually, remote support people are sort of afraid of Schekn. Any Earthman who meets a Bighead eventually starts being sort of afraid. At the same time, as paradoxical as it may sound, that same Earthman would be unable to perceive a Bighead as anything other than a large talking dog (circus, miracles of animal psychology, whatever...)

One of the remote support people unwisely threatens Schekn with withholding his lunch should he wish to continue being difficult. Schekn starts yelling. It is now apparent that he, Schekn, has lived his entire life without relying on remote support. Moreover, up until now we were doing just fine out here, especially because remote support was nowhere to be seen or heard.

I am standing in the rain as it's getting harder and harder, listening to all this support nonsense with beans, seemingly unable to shake off some sort of dreamy stupor. It feels like I am watching a remarkably stupid play without beginning or end, where all actors have completely forgotten their lines and keep ad-libbing hoping (in vain) for some miraculous resolution. As if this play has been staged just for me, to hold me where I am as long as possible, to keep me from moving on; meanwhile, behind the scenes, someone is setting things up to make me realize that nothing is going to make any difference and we should turn around and go home... With an enormous effort, I get a grip and turn the damn projector

off. Schekn immediately stops in the middle of a long, carefully constructed insult and starts walking as if nothing happened. I walk behind him, listening to Vanderhuse putting things right on his ship, "What a shame! Impeding a field group! I'll kick you out of the control room! I'll suspend you! Quit your yapping!"

"Are you entertaining yourself?" I ask Schekn quietly.

He only gives me a sideways look.

"You're such a squabblor," I say, "and all you Bigheads are squabblers and brawlers."

"It's wet out here," Schekn replies irrelevantly, "and there's a lot of frogs around. You can't put your foot down without stepping onto one... Trucks again," he reports.

The fog ahead definitely smells of wet and rusty metal, and in about a minute, we find ourselves in the middle of a huge and disorderly herd of all sorts of motor vehicles.

Flatbed trucks, moving vans, giant semis, small teardrop-shaped cars, some monstrous contraptions with eight wheels each as tall as a person. Parked in the middle of the street and on the sidewalks, randomly and crookedly, bumping into each other, sometimes even on top of one another. Incredibly rusty, half-disintegrated, falling apart at the slightest touch. Hundreds of them. There's no way of getting through it fast; you have to get around, squeeze through, climb over. All vehicles are full of household goods that have long since rotted beyond recognition...

Suddenly, the ugly labyrinth ends.

Well, the machines are still there, hundreds of them, but now they are parked in some resemblance of order, on both sides of the street and on the sidewalks, with the middle of the street completely open.

I look at Schekn. He shakes the water out of his coat, scratches himself with all four paws at the same time, licks his back, spits, swears and finally begins to shake, scratch, and lick all over again. Vanderhuse asks worriedly why we deviated from the route and what sort of storage area we've just been through. I explain that it wasn't a storage area. We discuss the findings; if it was an evacuation, then why did the locals evacuate from the outskirts into downtown?

"I am not going back this way," Schekn says and angrily stomps on a frog trying to get by.

At two PM the headquarters broadcasts the first summary of

findings. An ecological disaster is evident, but the civilization went extinct for some other reason. The population disappeared virtually overnight, but they didn't die in wars, nor did they evacuate through the outer space; they just didn't have that kind of technology. The planet is not a cemetery; it's a junkyard. The few remaining locals barely survive in the countryside doing subsistence farming; no discernible culture, but great skills with semi-automatic rifles. Conclusion for Schekn and me: the city must be completely empty. I doubt it, and so does Schekn.

The street becomes wider, buildings and vehicles on both sides completely disappear in the fog, and I feel an open space ahead. A few more steps, and a low rectangular shape materializes ahead. Another armored vehicle, just like the one that was buried under the fallen wall, but this one looks like it grew into the asphalt. I can't see a thing in front of me. The fog in this square is especially, unnaturally dense, as if it was concentrating here for years and finally curdled like milk.

"Under your feet!" Schekn suddenly commands.

I look under my feet, but can't see anything. Suddenly, I realize that under my feet is no longer the asphalt, but something soft, elastic, and slippery, like plush wet carpeting. I squat.

"You can turn on your projector," Schekn grumbles.

But I can see without a projector that the asphalt here is covered with a thick unappetizing crust, some pressurized damp mass overgrown with multi-colored mold. I take out a knife and lift up a layer of this crust; separating from the moldy mass is a piece of cloth or leather, and barely visible under it there's something rounded (a button? a buckle?) And slowly straightening are some tiny wires or springs...

"They all walked through here..." Schekn says with a strange intonation.

I get up and keep walking, stepping on the soft and slippery. I try to reign in my imagination, but fail. They all walked through here, leaving behind their now-unnecessary cars and trucks, hundreds of thousands and millions of them pouring into this square, flowing around the armored vehicle with its threatening, but powerless machine guns, sometimes dropping some of the few things they tried to carry with them; they stumbled and dropped things, maybe they even fell and couldn't get up, and whatever fell down was trampled upon by millions and millions of feet. And somehow I

thought that it all happened at night, the human slush lighted by ghostly lights, and everything quiet, like in a dream...

"A pit," Schekn says.

I turn on the projector. There is no pit. As far as the light can reach, the square, even and smooth, lights up with pale spots of luminescent mold; and glistening wetly two paces away, there is a large, approximately twenty by forty meters, rectangle of bare asphalt. It looks like it's carefully cut out of the gleaming carpet of mold.

"Steps!" Shekn says with desperation. "Perforated! Deep! Can't see..."

I get goose bumps; I have never heard Schekn speak in this tone of voice. Without looking down, I lower my hand; my fingers touch his large head, and I feel the nervous twitching of a triangular ear. The fearless Schekn is scared. The fearless Schekn presses his body against my leg, just like his ancestors pressed against the legs of their masters when they smelled something unfamiliar and dangerous outside the cave...

"There is no bottom..." he says desperately. "I can't understand. There's always a bottom. They all went there, and there is no bottom, and no one came back... Do we have to go there?"

I squat and hug him around the neck.

"I don't see a pit," I say in the Bighead language, "I see only an asphalt rectangle."

Schekn is breathing heavily. All his muscles are tense, and he keeps pressing against me.

"You can't see it," he says, "you don't know how. Four stairways with perforated steps. Worn. Gleaming. Going deeper and deeper. Into nowhere. I don't want to go there. Don't order me to."

"Buddy," I say, "what's wrong with you? How can I order you to do anything?"

"Don't ask," he says. "Don't invite me along."

"We're just going to leave," I say.

"Yes! And fast!"

I dictate a report. Vanderhuse already patched me through to the headquarters, and when I finish, the entire expedition knows.

Conversations ensue. Hypotheses are stated, measures are proposed. It gets noisy. Schekn little by little regains composure; he starts casting sideways looks around and constantly licks his chops. The noise dies down. We are ordered to keep going, and we

gladly comply.

We skirt the dreaded rectangle, cross the square, pass the second armored vehicle locking the street from the other side, and again find ourselves between two lines of abandoned automobiles.

Schekn once again runs ahead at a brisk pace, energetic, quarrelsome, and arrogant. I laugh to myself and think that if I were he, I would be overcome with awkwardness over the fit of almost childish fear that I couldn't control back there, at the square. Schekn, however, is overcome with nothing. Yes, he was scared and couldn't hide it, and he sees nothing shameful or awkward about it. Now he is thinking aloud,

"They all went underground. If there was a bottom, I would assure you that they all live underground now, very deep, completely quiet. But there is no bottom! I don't understand where they can live. I don't understand why there is no bottom and how it can be."

"Try to explain," I say. "It's very important."

But Schekn can't explain. Very scary, he keeps saying. Planets are round, he tries to explain, and this planet is round too, I saw it myself, but in that square, it is not round at all. It's like a plate. And there's a hole in the plate. And the hole leads from one empty place where we are to another empty place where we aren't.

"And why didn't I see that hole?"

"Because it's glued over. You can't. It was glued over against those who are like you, not against those who are like I..."

Then he suddenly informs me that there's danger again. Small danger, the usual kind. For a while, it wasn't there at all, but now it's there again.

A minute later, a balcony falls off the façade of the building to our right. I quickly ask if the danger has diminished. He immediately responds that yes, it did, but not by much. I want to ask him from what side the danger is coming from, but then a gust of dense air hits me on the back, the wind starts whistling in my ears, and Schekn's hair stands on its end.

A small hurricane rushes through the street. It is hot and it smells like metal.

"What's happening over there?" Vanderhuse is screaming.

"Some sort of draft..." I reply through my teeth.

Another gust of wind sends me running forward a few paces.

Humiliating, really.

"Abalkin! Schekn!" Komov is thundering. "Keep to the middle!

Stay away from walls! I am blowing the fog off the square, you may see some buildings collapse...”

The wind blows Schekn off his feet and slowly drags him along the pavement next to some reckless rat.

“Is that all?” he asks irritably when the storm passes. He doesn’t even try to get up on his feet.

“That’s all,” says Komov. “You can move on.”

“Thank you very much.” Schekn says, and there is more poison in his voice than in the most poisonous snake.

Someone tries to stifle a laugh, but fails. Sounds like Vanderhuse.

“My apologies,” says Komov. “I had to blow the fog off.”

In response, Schekn utters the longest and most elaborate curse in the Bighead language, gets up, shakes off, and suddenly freezes in an uncomfortable pose.

“Lev,” he says, “there’s no danger anymore. At all. It got blown away.”

“That’s good enough for me,” I say.

From a Report by Lev Abalkin

Information from Espada. A very emotional description of the Chief Gattaukh. I can literally see him in my mind's eye, an unimaginably dirty, smelly, and warty old man who looks like he is two hundred years old, but claims to be twenty-one, wheezing, coughing, spitting and blowing his nose, holding a semi-automatic rifle in his lap and every now and then shooting at the world above Espada's head. He doesn't want to answer any questions, but keeps asking his own, listening to answers with deliberate inattention and loudly proclaiming every other answer to be a lie...

The street flows into another square. Well, it's not exactly a square; on the right, there is a semicircular park, behind which there is a long yellow building with a concave façade decorated with faux columns. The façade is yellow, and the bushes in the park are also withering yellow, as if in early fall, so I don't see another "glass" right away.

This one is undamaged and glistens like new, as if it was installed among these yellow bushes just this morning; a cylinder two meters tall and one meter in diameter, made of semi-translucent amber-like material. It stands up vertically, and its oval door is tightly closed. Vanderhuse and his team momentarily go mad with enthusiasm, while Schekn once again demonstrates his ambivalence and even contempt to all these things in which his people are not interested: he immediately starts scratching, with his rear turned towards the "glass".

I walk around the "glass", then gently take a little protrusion on the door with two fingers and carefully look inside. One glance is quite enough; the entire inside of the "glass" is filled with monstrous gangly legs, thorny half-meter pincers, and dull green eyes of a giant cancer-spider from Pandora in all its glory.

It wasn't fear, but a reflexive reaction to the absolutely unforeseen. Before I realized what I was doing, my shoulder was already pushing the door closed with all the power I had in me.

Schekn is next to me, ready for an immediate and decisive fight. He is shifting his weight, moving his large head from side to side. His blindingly white teeth glisten wetly in the corners of his mouth.

This lasts a few seconds, then he asks grudgingly, "What's the matter? Who is attacking you?"

I grope for the scorcher, make myself to let go of the damn door,

and start backing off, the scorcher at the ready. Schekn backs off too, getting more and more irritated.

"I asked you a question!" he says indignantly.

"You can't feel it," I say through my teeth, "can you?"

"Where? In this booth? There's nothing in it!"

Vanderhuse and remote support people are making worried noises. I am not listening. I know without their suggestions that I can prop the door up with a log (if I can find one) or burn the whole thing with the scorcher. I keep backing off, eyes fixed on the door of the "glass".

"There's nothing in this booth!" Schekn repeats empathically. "And nobody. Hasn't been for years. Do you want me to open the door and show you?"

"No," I say, having a hard time managing my vocal cords. "Let's get out of here."

"Just let me open the door..."

"Schekn," I say, "you're making a mistake."

"We don't make mistakes. I am going. You will see."

"You're making a mistake!" I roar. "If you don't come with me right away, it would mean you're not my friend and you don't care about me!"

I turn on my heels (the scorcher in the lowered hand, safety off, set for continuous discharge) and start walking away. My back is very wide and completely unprotected.

Schekn unhappily stomps behind, off to the left. He grumbles and tries to pick a fight. But when we retreat about two hundred paces and I start making inroads to reconciliation, Schekn suddenly disappears, leaving behind only the clicking sound of his claws on the asphalt. Now he is near the booth, and it's too late to run after him, grab his hind legs and drag the idiot away, and the scorcher is now completely useless, and the damn Bighead is opening the door a crack and takes a long, endlessly long, look inside the "glass". Then, without uttering a sound, he closes the door and returns. Schekn is humiliated. Schekn is destroyed. Schekn admitting his utter uselessness and thus ready to tolerate any imaginable mistreatment in the future. He returns and sits down at my feet, his head lowered. We remain quiet for a while. I avoid looking at him. I look at the "glass", feeling perspiration dry up on my temples, the skin tightening, muscular shivers going away, displaced by dull pain. Most of all, I want to hiss, "You bastard!"

and slap him on his despondent, stupid, stubborn, brainless big head. But all I say is,

“We got lucky. Whatever the reason, they don’t attack here...”

A message from headquarters. It is believed that “the Schekn rectangle” is an entrance into an interspatial tunnel, through which the population of the planet was evacuated. Presumably, by the Wanderers.

We are walking through an unusually empty area. No wildlife here, even the mosquitoes are gone. I feel rather discomforted, but Schekn shows no signs of worry.

“This time, you’re late,” he grumbles.

“Yeah, looks like it,” I reply readily.

This is the first time Schekn speaks after the cancer-spider incident. He seems to want to talk about things not present, which he doesn’t do often.

“The Wanderers,” he grumbles, “I keep hearing, the Wanderers this, the Wanderers that... Do you people know anything about them?”

“Very little. We know they are a super-civilization, far more powerful than we are. We assume that they’ve settled throughout our galaxy a long time ago. We also assume that they have no home, whether in our understanding of the term or yours. That’s why we call them the Wanderers...”

“Do you people want to meet them?”

“Well, how should I put it? Komov would give his right hand to make it happen. I, on the other hand, would prefer that we never see them...”

“Are you afraid of them?”

I don’t want to discuss this problem. Especially now.

“You see, Schekn,” I say, that is a long conversation. Can you look around? It seems you’re a little absent-minded at the moment.”

“I am looking. Everything is quiet.”

“Did you notice that the animals are gone?”

“It’s because people come here often,” Schekn says.

“Is that so?” I say. “Well, that’s comforting.”

“Right now, there are none here. Almost none.”

Block Forty-Two is ending, we are approaching the cross street.

Suddenly, Schekn says,

“There’s a man around the corner. Alone.”

It’s a decrepit old man wearing a long black coat, a fur hat with earflaps tied under his unkempt beard, bright yellow gloves, and

enormous boots with cloth tops. He moves laboriously, barely able to shuffle his feet. He is about thirty meters away, but even at this distance it's easy to hear his heavy, whistling breathing, sometimes augmented with groans of exhaustion.

He is loading up a cart on tall thin wheels, something like a baby stroller. He shuffles off into a broken store window, stays inside for a long time, then slowly emerges, one hand groping for support, the other clutching two or three brightly labeled cans to his chest. Every time he makes it back to his cart, he drops onto a three-legged folding stool, sits on it for a while, resting, then starts slowly and carefully transferring the cans from his grip into the cart. Then he rests again, as if napping; then he gets up, and heads inside, a long black figure almost folded in half.

We are standing on the corner, barely hiding, because we realize that the old man sees or hears nothing. Shekn says he is alone here, there's nobody around. I have no desire to make contact, but it looks like I'll have to, at least to help him with those cans. But I don't want to scare him. I ask Vanderhuse to show the picture to Espada so that Espada can determine whether he is a "wizard", a "soldier", or a "common man".

The old man offloaded the tenth helping of cans and is now resting, slouching on his three-legged stool. His head is shaking and falls lower and lower toward his chest. Looks like he is falling asleep. "I've never seen anything like this," Espada announces. "Talk to him, Lev."

"He's too old for this," says Vanderhuse doubtfully.

"He's going to die." Schekn grumbles.

"Exactly," I say, "especially if I appear in front of him in my rainbow overalls..."

I didn't finish the sentence. The old man suddenly lurches forward and softly falls on his side.

"That's it," says Schekn, "we can come and look if you want."

The old man is dead; he is not breathing and there is no pulse. Looks like a massive myocardial infarction plus complete emaciation. But it's not caused by starvation. He is simply very old. I kneel and look into his greenish-white face. The first normal person in this city. Dead. And I can't do anything, because all I have is a field kit.

I inject him with two doses of microphagus and tell Vanderhuse to send the medics over. I am not going to stick around. There's no

point in it. He won't talk. And if he does, it's not going to be soon. Before I leave, I stand over him for another minute, looking at the cart half-filled with cans and at the toppled folding stool; it occurs to me that the old man must have dragged this stool everywhere he went and rested on it every minute or two...

About eighteen hundred hours, it starts getting dark. I figure we are about two hours away from the end of the route, and I offer Schekn a chance to rest and eat. Schekn doesn't need to rest, but he would never pass up a chance to snack.

We settle on the edge of a vast defunct fountain in the shade of a stone-carved sculpture of some mythical winged monster, and I open up the rations. Around us, there are walls of dead buildings, it is dead quiet, but it is comforting to know that over tens of kilometers of our routes the dead emptiness is no more; people work there now.

Schekn never talks when he eats; however, when he is full, he likes to chat.

"That old man," he says, thoroughly licking his paw. "Did they really reanimate him?"

"Yes."

"So he's alive again, walking, talking?"

"I doubt he's talking, never mind walking, but he's alive."

"Too bad," Schekn grumbles.

"Too bad?"

"Yes. Too bad he can't talk. It would be interesting to find out what's there."

"Where?"

"Where he was when he was dead."

I chuckle.

"You think there's something there?"

"Has to be. I have to go somewhere when I am no longer here."

"Where does electric current go when it's turned off?" I ask.

"That I never understood," Schekn admits, "but your analogy is flawed. No, I don't know where current goes when it's turned off. But I also don't know where it comes from when it's turned on. And I do know where I came from."

"So where were you before you were born?" I ask insidiously. But that question is no problem for Schekn.

"I was in the blood of my parents. And before that, in the blood of their parents."

“Well, when you’re gone, you will be in the blood of your children...”

“What if I don’t get to have children?”

“Then you’ll be in the soil, the grass, the trees...”

“Not so! My body will be in the grass and the trees. But where will I be?”

“You weren’t in the blood of you parents, either; your body was. You don’t remember what it was like to be in the blood of your parents, do you?”

“What do you mean, don’t remember?” Schekn marvels, “I do remember quite a bit!”

“Ah, indeed...” I mumble, defeated. “You guys have genetic memory...”

“Call it what you want,” Schekn grumbles, “but I really don’t understand where I would go if I died now. I don’t have children...”

I decide to quit the argument. It is obvious that I will never be able to prove to Schekn that there’s nothing “there”. So I silently fold up the ration package, put it back into the backpack, and get comfortable by stretching out my legs.

Schekn thoroughly licked his second paw, smoothed to perfection the hair on his cheeks, and now starts another conversation.

“You surprise me, Lev,” he announces. “You all surprise me. Haven’t you had enough of this place? Why work without any reason?”

“Why without a reason? You see yourself how much we learned in a single day.”

“That’s exactly what I mean. Why do you have to learn about things that make no sense? What are you going to do with this knowledge? You keep learning, but you do nothing with what you’ve learned.”

“Give me an example,” I ask.

Schekn is a great polemist. He just won one debate and clearly wants to win another.

“For example, that bottomless pit that I found. Who and why would want a pit without a bottom?”

“That’s not really a pit,” I say, “it’s more like a door into another world.”

“Can you people walk through it?” Schekn inquires.

“No,” I admit, “we can’t.”

“So why do you need a door you can’t walk through?”

“We can’t do it today, but maybe we can do it tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Broadly speaking. The day after tomorrow. Or next year...”

“Another world, another world...” Schekn grumbles, “Don’t you have enough room in this one?”

“Well, what can I say... There’s never enough room for imagination.”

“Yeah, right!” Schekn utters sarcastically. “As soon as you find another world, you immediately start changing it to look like yours. And, of course, your imagination gets cramped, and then you start looking for another world to remake.”

He suddenly stops his diatribe, and I realize there’s someone else here. Very close. Two paces away. Near the pedestal of the mythical monster.

It’s a perfectly normal local (probably, a “common man”), a strong tall male wearing tarpaulin pants and tarpaulin jacket, with a semi-automatic rifle hanging over his neck. A shock of uncombed hair almost covers his eyes, but his cheeks and chin are cleanly shaven. He stands near the pedestal, completely motionless, only his eyes slowly move from me to Schekn and back. Looks like he can see in the darkness no worse than we can. I have no idea how he managed to get so close to us without us noticing.

I carefully put my hand behind my back and turn on the translator. “Come closer, sit down, we’re friends,” I say soundlessly, only moving my lips.

Half a second later, the translator emits some fairly pleasant guttural sounds.

The stranger gives a start and takes a step back.

“Don’t be afraid,” I say. “What’s your name? My name is Lev, his name is Schekn. We’re not enemies. We’d like to talk to you.”

No, it’s not working. The stranger takes another step back and half-hides behind the pedestal. His face is still expressionless, and it’s not clear if he understands what’s being said.

“We have good food,” I keep pushing. “Are you hungry or thirsty? Sit with us, it would be my pleasure to treat you...”

Suddenly I realize that the local might be freaking out hearing “we” and “us”, so I switch to singular in a hurry. That doesn’t help, either. The local hides behind the pedestal completely, and I can no

longer see or hear him.

“He’s leaving,” Schekn grumbles.

Then I see him again; he crosses the street in long, completely noiseless strides, steps on the sidewalk on the opposite side, and without looking back once, disappears through a gateway.

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Lev Abalkin in Sight

Around 18:00, Sandro and Andrei showed up at my place unannounced. I hid the paper file in my desk and told them in no uncertain terms that I will not talk shop, since they now work for Claudius, not for me. In addition, I am busy.

They started whining; apparently, they had no intention to talk shop, they simply missed me, and I really shouldn't treat them like that. Whatever else they may know, they definitely know how to whine. I softened up. We opened the bar and spent some time talking about my cacti. Then I suddenly realized that we were not talking about cacti nearly as much as we talked about Claudius, which was somewhat justified, since Claudius did indeed resemble a cactus, but before I could say anything, the young provocateurs nicely and smoothly shifted the topic of the conversation to a case involving bioreactors and Captain Nemo.

I played along, letting them get excited and then, and the culmination, when they decided their boss was ready, told them to get out. I would kick them out, for they made me angry with both themselves and myself, but at that point (and also unannounced) Alyona dropped in. That's destiny, I thought, and went to the kitchen. It was dinner time anyway, and even the youngest of the provocateurs know that we're not supposed to talk shop in front of outsiders.

The dinner turned out very nicely. The provocateurs without a care in the world were trying to impress Alyona. She kept cutting them down, and very time she did, I would try to impress her, just to keep the stew simmering. The rooster parade ended in a great argument about how to continue the night's festivities. Sandro insisted that we should go see the Octopi, and immediately, because the Octopi play their best numbers in the beginning of the show. Andrei hotly objected, as if he were a music critic; his attacks on the Octopi were passionate and amazingly void of substance, his theory of modern music was strikingly fresh and basically boiled down to the idea that tonight is a great time to take out the Philosopher, his new sailboat. I wanted to stay home and play charades or, failing that, forfeits.

At the height of this discussion, at 19:33, the videophone started chirping. Andrei, who sat the closest to the unit, punched the on key. The screen lit up, but there was no picture. I couldn't hear a

thing, because Sandro kept howling as loudly as he could, “Islands, islands, islands,” supplementing the howling with ridiculous dance moves in an attempt to imitate the inimitable B. Touareg.

Meanwhile, Alyona stubbornly counterattacked him with what sounded like *Wordless Song* by Glier.

“Quiet, you!” I barked trying to get to the videophone.

It got a little quieter, but the unit was still silent, its glaring screen empty. It probably wasn’t the Excelency, so I relaxed.

“Wait, let me move the unit,” I said to the bluish glare.

In the study, I put the unit on the desk, fell into an armchair, and said,

“All right, it’s a little quieter in here. But keep in mind, I can’t see you.”

“Sorry, I forgot,” a deep male voice said, and a face appeared on the screen. It was narrow, pale, with deep folds going from the sides of the nose down to the chin. Low and wide forehead, big deep-set eyes, long, to the shoulder, straight black hair.

I recognized him immediately.

“Hello, Mak,” he said. “Do you recognize me?”

I needed a few seconds to get my thoughts together. I was completely unprepared for this.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute...” I started mumbling, trying to figure out how I should play it.

“The name’s Lev Abalkin,” he reminded. “Remember? Saraksh, the Blue Snake?”

“Oh my God!” screamed Kammerer the journalist, formerly known as Mak Sim, the Earth’s resident agent on planet Saraksh. “Leo! But I was told that you’re not on Earth and you’re not expected back any time soon... Or are you still out there?”

He was smiling.

“No, I’m already here... But it seems I am interrupting, am I not?”

“There is no way you can be interrupting!” Kammerer the journalist said empathically. Not the Kammerer who visited Maya Glumova, but rather the one who visited the teacher. “I need you! I am writing a book about the Bigheads, you know!”

“Yes, I know,” he interrupted. “That’s why I am calling. But listen, Mak, I have not worked with the Bigheads for a long time.”

“That actually doesn’t matter,” Kammerer the journalist objected.

“What’s important is that you were the first to deal with them.

“Actually, you were the first.”

“Not at all. I simply learned of their existence, and that was it. And I have already written up everything about what I did. I also collected some material about Komov’s latest works. As you can see, I have a prolog and an epilog; all I am missing is a small part, the main content. Listen, Leo, we definitely have to meet. How long are you going to be on Earth?”

“Not very long,” he said, “but we will definitely meet. Although I wouldn’t want to do it today...”

“Well, today is not convenient for me, either,” Kammerer the journalist quickly played along. “How about tomorrow though?” For a time, he silently looked at me. I suddenly thought that I can’t tell the color of his eyes, so deeply set they were under the overhang of his eyebrows.

“Amazing,” he said. “You haven’t changed a bit. Have I?”

“Honestly?” asked Kammerer the journalist, just to say anything. Lev Abalkin smiled again.

“Yes,” he said. “It’s been twenty years. And you know, Mak, I still think of those times as the happiest ones. Everything was still ahead of me; everything was just beginning... And, you know, I reflect on those times now and think, how lucky was I to begin under such leaders as Komov and you, Mak...”

“Aw, Leo, don’t exaggerate,” Kammerer the journalist said. “What did I have to do with it?”

“What do you mean, ‘what did I have to do with it’? Komov led, Rawlinsong and I were assisting, but you coordinated everything!” Kammerer the journalist stared in disbelief. So did I, but I also felt alarmed.

“Well, Leo,” Kammerer the journalist said, “you, my friend, were young, so you probably didn’t understand the subordination back then. The only things I did for you were security, transportation, and supplies. And even that-”

“And supplied ideas!” Lev Abalkin inserted.

“What ideas?”

“The idea of expedition to the Blue Snake is yours, right?”

“Well, to the extent that I reported-”

“Aha! That’s one. The idea that Progressors, not animal psychologists, should work with the Bigheads is two!”

“Wait a minute, Lev! That was Komov’s idea! I, on the other hand, didn’t really care! I had the uprising in Pandea on my hands! The first mass landing of the Ocean Empire! You of all people should

understand... Oh God! To be completely honest, I didn't even think of you all at the time! Zef handled you, Zef, not I! Remember the red-haired native?"

Lev Abalkin was laughing, showing smooth white teeth.

"And there's nothing to snicker at!" Kammerer the journalist said angrily. "You're making a fool out of me. What nonsense! No, my dear, it looks like I started the book just in time. I can't believe what sort of idiotic legends grew all over this!"

"All right, all right, I'll stop," said Abalkin. "We'll continue this argument in person."

"Exactly," said Kammerer the journalist. "Only there won't be an argument. There's nothing to argue about. So, here's what we're going to do..."

Kammerer the journalist played with the buttons of his desktop organizer.

"Tomorrow, ten hundred hours, my place... Or would it be more convenient for you?"

"Let's meet at my place," said Lev Abalkin.

"Then give me the address," Kammerer the journalist commanded. He still hasn't cooled down.

"The Aspen resort," said Lev Abalkin. "Cottage number six."

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Guessing the Intentions of Lev Abalkin

I dismissed Sandro and Andrei. Officially. I had to make an official face and speak in an official tone of voice, which wasn't all that difficult, because I wanted to be alone to do some serious thinking. Alyona instantaneously understood my mood, got quiet, and agreed not to enter my study and generally protect my peace and quiet. As far as I know, she completely misunderstands my work. For example, she is convinced that my work is dangerous. But some of the basics she understood really well. In particular, if I am suddenly busy, it doesn't mean that I have had an inspiration or got a brilliant idea; it means that an urgent problem came up and it must be urgently solved.

I pulled her ear and disappeared into the study, leaving her to clean the living room.

How did he find my number? That's simple; I left it with the teacher. Also, Maya Glumova might have mentioned me to him. So he either saw Maya again or decided to see the teacher. In spite of everything. Not a word for twenty years, and now he wanted to see him. Why?

What was the purpose of his call to me? Could it be sentimental? The memories of the first real job. Youth, the happiest time of life. Hmm, doubtful... An altruistic desire to help a journalist (the discoverer of his beloved Bigheads) in his work, spiced up by a healthy ambition? Nonsense. If that's the case, why did he give me a false address? But was it false? If it wasn't, he isn't hiding, so the Excellency must be confused... Indeed, how do we know that Lev Abalkin is hiding?

I quickly called up information, found the number and called cottage number six at the Aspen. No answer. As was to be expected.

All right, let's leave it be for now. What was the most important part of our conversation? By the way, I almost gave myself up once. If I did, it wouldn't be enough of a punishment to bite off my own tongue. "You of all people should understand what happens when the Fleet Group C lands!" "Interesting... Mak, what do you know of the Fleet Group C and, more importantly, why do you think I know anything about it?" Of course, he would say nothing of the sort, but he would think it through and understand everything. And after such a disgraceful slip, my only option would

be to retire into journalism for real... All right, let's hope he didn't notice. He didn't have any more time to analyze and evaluate every word than I did. He was clearly working toward some goal of his own, and everything unrelated to that goal he, one would think, simply ignored...

But what was it that he wanted? Why did he try to ascribe to me both his own achievements and those of Komov? And so directly, almost at hello... One would think that I actually plant legends about my priority and my authorship of every fundamental idea regarding the Bigheads; that I claim everything is mine, and he found out about it decided to let me know that I am a piece of shit. In any case, he did sneer rather ambiguously... But that's nonsense! These days, the fact that I discovered the Bigheads is known only to the narrowest of the specialists, and even they might have forgotten it as a useless bit of information.

Utter nonsense, of course. But the fact remains: I just got a call from Lev Abalkin, who informed me that in his opinion, I, Kammerer the journalist, am a founder of, and a major authority in, Bighead studies. There was nothing else of substance in our conversation. Everything else was courtesy fluff. Well, there was also a (likely) false address in the end...

Of course, there's another theory. He didn't care what to talk about. He could afford to spew any kind of nonsense, because he called only to take a look at me. The teacher or Maya Glumova told him, a certain Maxim Kammerer is looking for you. "Oh really?" he thinks. "That's very strange! As soon as I arrive to Earth, I hear of this Maxim Kammerer. And I used to know a Maxim Kammerer. What is this? Coincidence? Lev Abalkin doesn't believe in coincidence. Let me call this man and see if he is indeed Maxim Kammerer, aka Mak Sim from the past... And if so, let's see how he reacts..."

I thought that might be it. He called and just in case turned off his image transmission. Just in case I am not Maxim Kammerer. He saw me. Probably surprised, but definitely relieved. This is indeed Maxim Kammerer, he is hosting a party, lots of fun and noise, absolutely nothing suspicious. All right, now he can utter a dozen of meaningless phrases, set up a meeting, and disappear...

But this is not the whole truth; and not all of it is truth, either. There are two problems here. First, why did he need to initiate the conversation at all? He could look and listen, verify that I am who I

say I am, and happily switch off. It would look like a coincidence; someone got a wrong number, and that's it.

And second, I wasn't born yesterday, either. I saw that he wasn't just talking to me. He was also watching my reactions. He wanted to make sure that I was in fact I and that I would react in a certain way to certain things he said. He spouted nonsense and carefully watched my reaction to it. Again, this is strange. To obvious nonsense, all people react identically. So either there's an error in my reasoning or... Or, from Abalkin's viewpoint, the nonsense isn't nonsense. For example, for whatever reasons completely unknown to me, Abalkin really thought that my role in the Bighead studies is extremely important. He called me to test his assumptions and based on my reaction concluded that his assumption was incorrect. Sounds logical, but somehow strange. What do the Bigheads have to do with it? Although they did play a fundamental role in Lev Abalkin's life. Stop!

If I were asked to briefly outline the most important facts of this man's biography, I would probably say, he liked to work with the Bigheads; he wanted to work with the Bigheads more than anything; he was already successfully working with the Bigheads, but for whatever reason, he was taken off that work... Damn, it wouldn't be surprising if he finally lost his patience, forgot all about the Group C headquarters, about COMCON, about the discipline, forgot about it all and returned to Earth to find out once and for all why he was not allowed to do what he loves, who – personally – stood in his way his entire life, and who is responsible for the derailment of his carefully made plans, for his bitter lack of understanding of what's really going on, for fifteen years spent on immeasurably hard and unloved work... So he came back!

He came back and immediately heard my name. And recalled that I was, in fact, the curator his first encounter with the Bigheads, and he wanted to know whether I took part in this unprecedented act of taking a man's favorite thing to do away from him, and he found out (by using a simple trick) that I didn't; at the time, I apparently was fighting off the landings and was generally uninformed.

So that's how the most recent conversation could be explained. But only that conversation and nothing else. This hypothesis doesn't explain the dark story with Tristan, nor the dark story with Maya Glumova, nor the reason for Lev Abalkin to hide. Well, damn it, if my hypothesis were correct, Lev Abalkin would be going up and

down COMCON hallways, beating up people who wronged him, as is to be expected of a person with lack of impulse control and artistic temperament... However, there was something rational in my hypothesis, and it did raise some practical questions. I wanted to ask the Excellency those questions, but first I had to call Sergei Fedoseyev.

I looked at the clock: 21:51. Let's hope that the old man is still awake.

The old man was indeed awake. Perplexed, as if not recognizing, he looked at Kammerer the journalist. Kammerer the journalist profusely apologized for a late call. The apologies were accepted, but the perplexity was still there.

"I literally have two questions to ask," Kammerer the journalist said anxiously. "You did see Abalkin, didn't you?"

"Yes. I gave him your number."

"I am sorry, but... He just called me... And spoke to me in a really strange way..." Kammerer the journalist was having trouble choosing his words. "I thought that... I understand that it's probably nothing, anything can happen... After all, he could have misunderstood you..."

The old man perked up.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Well, you told him about me... About what you and I talked about..."

"Of course. I don't understand you. Should I not have told him?"

"Well, that's not the point. I think he misunderstood you. Imagine, I have not seen him for fifteen years. And now, after barely saying hello, he starts, with some sort of painful sarcasm, praising me for things that... In short, he essentially accused me of claiming his achievements in working with the Bigheads! I assure you, it's completely groundless... Please understand, my role is only that of a journalist, a chronicler, and nothing more..."

"Wait a minute, young man!" the old man raised his hand. "Please calm down. I told him nothing of the sort. If for no other reason, then because I don't understand any of it..."

"Well... Perhaps... You might have formulated it vaguely..."

"No, I haven't formulated a thing! I told him that a journalist named Kammerer is writing a book about him and asked me for material. His number is such and such. Call him. That's it; that's all I told him."

"In that case, I don't understand," Kammerer the journalist said almost desperately. "I don't know... It must be something painful. A mania of sorts. Those Progressors may be well behaved at work, but on Earth, they sometimes let themselves go. Nerves, I suppose..."

The old man hid his eyes behind his eyebrows.

"Well, you know... After all, it is possible that Leo actually misunderstood me. Misheard, more precisely... The conversation was short, I was in a hurry, the wind was strong, the pines were ruffled, and I only mentioned you at the very last moment..."

"Oh no, I don't mean anything offensive..." Kammerer the journalist backed off. "It's quite possible that I misunderstood Lev... I was, you know, among other things, shaken up by his appearance... He changed, became sort of unkind... Did you notice?"

Yes, he did notice. Prodded and pushed along by a poorly concealed grudge of the simple-minded and talkative journalist Kammerer, he gradually and stumblingly, obviously embarrassed by both his student and some of his own thoughts, told the story of what happened.

At approximately 17:00, S.P. Fedoseyev left his home, the Mosquito Manor, by glider and headed toward Sverdlovsk, where he was to attend a club meeting. Within fifteen minutes, he was forced to land in a wild pine forest by another glider, flown, as it turned out, by Lev Abalkin. On a clearing, among pines ruffled by the wind, they had a brief conversation engineered by Lev Abalkin along the lines I already observed.

Having barely said hello, he wasted no time on hugs and proceeded to shower the old man with sarcastic expressions of thankfulness. He caustically praised the poor Mr. Fedoseyev for the efforts he supposedly made to persuade the Assignment Commission to direct the young Abalkin not to the Institute of Animal Psychology, where he due to his stupidity and lack of life experience intended to study, but to the Progressor School, the said efforts having led to a brilliant success and made the remainder of Lev Abalkin's life worry-free and happy.

The old man, shocked by such a brazen perversion of the truth, naturally, slapped his former student across the face. Having thus brought him back into the proper state of keeping silent and paying attention, he calmly explained that in reality, the exact opposite happened. It was he, S.P. Fedoseyev, who wanted Lev Abalkin to

study animal psychology; he made arrangements at the Institute and provided the Commission with appropriate recommendations. It was he, S.P. Fedoseyev, who protested the absurd decision of the Commission verbally and in writing, all the way up to the Regional Education Council. And it was he, S.P. Fedoseyev, who was finally called into the Eurasian Sector and whipped like a schoolboy for an amateurish attempt to override the Commission's decision. ("They showed me reports by four experts and told me that I am an old fool and the one who's right on this is Dr. Serafimovich, the chairman of the Commission...")

When he got to this point, the old man fell silent.

"So what did he do?" asked Kammerer the journalist.

The old man sadly chewed on his lips.

"The little fool kissed my hand and ran off to his glider."

We were silent for a while. Then the old man added,

"And that's when I remembered you... To be honest, I thought he just ignored it... Perhaps I should have told him more about you, but I was thinking about something else... Somehow, I was thinking, I would never see him again..."

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A Brief Conversation

The Excellency was home. Dressed in a formal black kimono, he was sitting at a workbench doing his favorite thing, looking at some ugly collectible figurine through a magnifying glass.

"Excellency," I said. "I need to know if Lev Abalkin made contact with anyone else on Earth."

"He did," said the Excellency and looked at me with what seemed to be an expression of interest.

"May I ask, with whom?"

"You may. With me."

I stumbled. The Excellency waited a few seconds, then ordered, "Report."

I reported. Both conversations in detail, my conclusions in brief, and added at the end that we should expect Abalkin to make contact with Komov, Rawlingson, Goryacheva, and other people who in one way or another had a hand in his work with the Bigheads. As well as with Dr. Serafimovich, the then-chairman of the Assignment Commission. Since the Excellency was silent and kept his head down, I allowed myself a question.

"May I ask, what did he talk to you about? I am surprised that he would contact you at all."

"You are surprised... So am I. But there wasn't a conversation. He did the same number on me he did on you. He turned off picture transmission. Looked at me, recognized me, probably, and switched off."

"So why do you think it was he?"

"Because he contacted me through a channel that was known to only one man."

"Perhaps that man-"

"No, that's impossible... As to your hypothesis, it is impotent. Lev Abalkin became an excellent agent, he loved his work and wouldn't want to change it for anything."

"Although his emotional type precludes him from being a Progressor?"

"That's outside your purview," said the Excellency coldly. "Don't get distracted. Get busy. My previous order to find Abalkin and initiate observation is hereby recalled. Instead, retrace his steps. I want to know where he's been, who he's seen, and what they've

been talking about.”

“Got it. And if I run into him?”

“Interview him for your book. And then report to me. No more no less.”

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Something about Mysteries

About 23:30, I took a quick shower, peeked into the bedroom and found that Alyona was sleeping like a baby. Then I returned to the study.

I decided to begin with Schekn. Schekn, of course, is not human and not even humanoid, so I needed all my experience and all my, false modesty aside, enormous skill in manipulating information channels to obtain the information I obtained. As a side note, most of my complanetaries have no idea of the capabilities of the eighth (or is it now ninth?) wonder of the world, the Great Worldwide Informatorium. I am willing to admit, though, that even I, with all my experience and skill, can lay no claim to perfection in using its vast memory banks.

I sent in eleven queries, three of which turned out redundant, and got the following information about the Bighead named Schekn. His full name, apparently, was Schekn-itrch. Since 75 until now, he was a member of the Bighead mission to Earth. Based on his functions during the mission's interaction with Earth authorities, he was an interpreter and administrator; his true status was unknown, for the relationships within the mission remained a mystery for humans. Based on some circumstantial information, Schekn headed one of the extended families comprising the mission, although no one has been able to figure out the headcount and the composition of this family; meanwhile, those factors, it appears, played a major role in resolving a host of diplomatic issues.

In general, there was a lot of factual information about Schekn and the mission. Some facts were amazing, but all of them eventually began to contradict newly established facts. It looked like our xenology was close to throwing its hands up (or folding them down, if you prefer) in desperation. Many decent xenologists joined Rawlingson, who about ten years ago uttered in a moment of weakness, "I think they're simply playing us!"

However, this had little to do with me. I only had to remember Rawlingson's words in the future.

The mission was located along Talon River in Canada, northwest of Baker Lake. The Bigheads, it turns out, were free to move about and used that freedom often, although they didn't use any

transportation except null-T. The mission's residence was built according to the project provided by the Bigheads themselves, but they chose not to inhabit the structure, preferring to reside around it in self-made underground chambers or, simply speaking, in burrows. They did not use telecommunications, and the efforts of our engineers who created video equipment optimized for their hearing, eyesight, and convenience of control were utterly lost. The Bigheads believed in personal contact. That meant I had to fly to Baker Lake.

When I was done with Schekn, I decided to look up Dr. Serafimovich. That wasn't difficult; he died twelve years ago at age one hundred and eighteen. Doctor of Education, permanent member of the Eurasian Education Council, member of the World Education Council, Valery M. Serafimovich. Pity.

I moved on to Korney Yashmaa. For the last two years, Korney Yashmaa, a Progressor, had his address listed as Jan's Camp, a villa located a few miles north of Antonov, in the steppes along the Volga River. He had a lengthy resume, from which it was obvious that his entire professional life was related to the planet Giganda. He seemed to be a major practitioner and an extraordinary theoretician in the area of experimental history, but all the details of his career flew out of my head when I noticed two minor facts. One: Korney Yashmaa was a posthumous son.

Two: Korney Yashmaa was born on 6 October 38. His parents, rather than being members of the Yormala Group, died in an accident during the Mirror Experiment.

I didn't want to trust my memory and went back to the papers in the folder. Everything was as I thought. And, of course, the handwritten note on the back of the Arabic text was still there, "...two of our twins met... I assure you, it was completely random..." Random... Well, on Giganda, it could have been random; Lev Abalkin, a posthumous son born on 6 October 38, met Korney Yashmaa, a posthumous son born on 6 October 38... And what am I dealing with here, another random event? Twins? Born from different parents. "If you don't believe me, look into 07 and 11." Okay. 07 is in front of me. So somewhere in the bowels of our department, there is also 11. It would be logical to assume there are also 01, 02, and so forth... By the way, I get a point off for not noticing this strange code, 07. We code our case files (not paper ones, of course, but the ones in crystal records) with made-up

phrases or names of things.

By the way, what's the Mirror Experiment? Never heard of it...

The thought appeared in the background, and I punched a query into the GWI almost automatically. The reply surprised me, "Information available on a need-to-know basis. Please enter your access code." I entered my access code and repeated the query.

This time, the response took a few seconds to come out,

"Information available on a need-to-know basis. Please enter your access code." Wow! For the first time in my memory, COMCON-2 clearance wasn't enough to get information from GWI.

At this point, I got a distinct feeling that I am out of my league.

Suddenly, I realized that sitting in front of me is an enormous dark secret; Abalkin's fate with all its mysteries stems from more than the secret of Abalkin's identity. It is intertwined with the fates of many other people, and I have no right to interfere in those fates, neither as an agent, nor as a person.

My frustration had nothing to do with the fact that the GWI refused to give me information about the Mirror Experiment, whatever that was. I was sure that the experiment has no relationship with the mystery at hand. The GWI's refusal was a suggestive smack on the back of the head, meant to make me look back. The smacking sort of cleared my vision, and I quickly saw the connections between the strange behavior of Yadviga Lekanova, the unusual level of secrecy, the Excellency's refusal to fully introduce me into the case's background, and even his initial directive to avoid contact with Abalkin. And now, the fantastic match of Lev Abalkin's and Korney Yashmaa's dates of birth.

There was a secret. Lev Abalkin was only a part of this secret. And now I understood why the Excellency put me on this case. There must have been people who knew the full background, but they probably were not suited for investigative work. There were enough people who were no worse, and possibly better, than I was at investigations, but the Excellency realized that the investigation will sooner or later lead to the secret, and it was important for the investigator to be able to stop in time. But even if the secret is divulged during the investigation, it was important for the Excellency to be able to trust the investigator as he would trust himself.

And to make things worse, the secret of Lev Abalkin is also the identity secret! That is the darkest secret possible; the person it

concerns must not know it. The simplest example: information about an incurable mental disorder. A more complicated example: the secret of a misdeed committed in ignorance and subsequently triggering irreversible consequences, similar to what happened to king Oedipus all those years ago...

Well, the Excelency has made the right choice. I don't like secrets. In these times on this planet, all secrets, in my opinion, smell like filth. I'll admit, many of them are sensational and capable of defying imagination, but personally, I feel unpleasant when I have to learn them and even more unpleasant when I have to divulge them to innocent bystanders. At COMCON-2, most people hold this viewpoint, and that's probably why information leaks are so rare. But my dislike of secrets, it appears, is above average. I even avoid the generally used expression, "to discover a secret" and prefer to say, "to dig up a secret". And my mental image of myself when I say this is that of a nightman, in the original meaning of the word. That's how I am feeling now.

From a Report by Lev Abalkin

...In the darkness, the city looks flat, like an old print. The mold is gleaming faintly inside the black window openings, and in the rare garden spots and on the flowerbeds, small ghastly rainbows are shining: the buds of the fluorescent flowers opened for the night. The smells are weak, but annoying. From behind the roofs, the first moon rises above the wide street, a huge serrated sickle flooding the city with unpleasant orange light.

This heavenly body causes unexplainable disgust to Schekn. He disapprovingly looks at it every minute, and every time he compulsively opens and shuts his muzzle, as if he is compelled to howl, but keeps restraining himself. This is doubly strange because on his native Saraksh, the moon is invisible due to atmospheric refraction and his attitude toward the Earth's moon always was completely indifferent, as far as I know anyway.

Then we see children.

There are two. Holding hands, they slowly move along the sidewalk, as if trying to hide in the shadows. They are headed the same way Schekn and I are headed. Judging by their clothing, both are boys. One is taller, about eight years old, the other is little, four or five. They must have just come out of a small side street, otherwise I would have seen them from far away. They've been walking for a while, quite a few hours probably, they are very tired and can barely move their feet. The younger one isn't really walking anymore, but dragging along holding the older one's hand. The older one is carrying a large flat bag on a wide shoulder strap; he keeps straightening it up, and it keeps slapping his knees.

The translator interprets in a dry passionless voice, "I am tired; my feet hurt... Keep going, I tell you... Keep going... You're a bad man... You're a bad man yourself; you're evil... A snake with ears... You're an inedible rat tail yourself..." Okay. They stopped. The younger one twists his hand out of the older one's grip and sits down. The older one lifts him up by the collar, but the younger one sits down again, and then the older one smacks him. The translator spits out a flurry of rats, snakes, foul-smelling animals and other fauna. Then the younger one starts crying loudly, and the puzzled translator shuts up. Time to interfere.

"Hello, kids," I say soundlessly with my lips.

I came very close to them, but they noticed me only now. The

younger one immediately stops crying and stares at me with his mouth wide open. The older one stares too, but warily, his lips pursed. I squat in front of him and say,

“Don’t be afraid. I am a good man, I won’t hurt you.”

I know that linguistic analyzers can’t translate intonation, so I try to pick simple soothing words.

“My name is Lev,” I say. “I see you’re tired. Would you like me to help you?”

The older one is not responding. He still stares warily, with a lot of mistrust and suspicion; the younger one suddenly shows interest in Schekn and keeps staring at him; it seems that he is scared and intrigued at once. Schekn, looking all nice, is sitting off to the side, his large head turned away.

“You’re tired,” I say. “Let me get you some munchies...”

At this point, the older one starts screaming. They’re not tired, and they don’t want any munchies. As soon as he is done with this rat-eared snake, they will move on. And whoever stands in the way will get a bullet in the gut. And that’s it.

Very well. No one is going to stand in the way. And where are they going?

They go where they need to go.

Oh, really? Any chance we’re all going to the same place? In that case, the rat-eared snake could be carried along on the shoulder...

In the end, everything settles down. Four tablets of chocolate are eaten and two flasks of tonic are drunk. Each tiny mouth gets a half-tube of fruit paste squeezed into it. Lev’s rainbow-colored outfit is carefully studied and (after a short, but very animated argument) it is allowed to stroke Schekn, but only once and only on his back and under no circumstances on his head. Aboard, in Vanderhuse’s control room, tears of endearment flow in a mighty stream.

In a little while, the following information comes out.

The boys are brothers, the older one’s name is Iyadrudan, the younger one’s, Pritulatan. They used to live far away from here (attempts to clarify fail) with their father in a large white house with a pool in the yard. Until recently, they had two aunts and another brother – the oldest, eighteen years old – live with them, but they all died. After that, their father stopped taking them along when he went out for food and started to go alone; and before that, they used to go all together, the entire family. There is a lot of food

around, here, there, and at the other place (attempts to clarify fail). Every time before he left alone, their father told them that if he doesn't return before the nightfall, they are to take the book, step out into the avenue, and keep going until they see a beautiful glass house shining in the dark. But they were not to enter the house; they were to sit down close by and wait; people would come for them and take them to a place where they would see father, mother, and everyone else. Why at night? Because there are no bad people out at night. They only come during daytime. No, we haven't seen them before, but we heard their bells ringing, playing songs, trying to lure us out of the house. When that happened, father and the oldest brother would grab their rifles and shoot them in the gut. No, they don't know any other people; haven't seen any. Although a long time ago, there were some people with rifles that came and spent the whole day arguing with father and the oldest brother; then mother and both aunts intervened. Everyone was screaming, but father, of course, convinced everyone, the strange people left and never came back...

The little Pritulatan falls asleep as soon as I pick him up. Iyadrudan, conversely, rejects all offers of help. He only allowed me to adjust his book bag and now walks beside me with an independent look about him, his hands in his pockets. Schekn runs ahead of us, not participating in the conversation. His appearance is that of complete indifference, but in reality, he is just as intrigued as any of us by the obvious assumption that the boys' destination, the shining house, is in fact what we dubbed "Spot 96".

...What the book says, Iyadrudan can't retell. In this book, all adults wrote about everything that happened each day. About how Pritulatan was stung by a venomous ant. About how water started to drain from the pool, but father stopped it. About how the aunt died; she was opening a can, mother looked at her, and she was already dead... Iyadrudan hasn't read the book, he's not good at reading and he doesn't like to read; he's got low aptitude. And Pritulatan has very high aptitude, but he's still little and doesn't understand anything. No, they've never been bored. How can you be bored in a house with five hundred and seven rooms? And in every room, there were rare things; some things, even father couldn't tell what they were for. Only there wasn't a single rifle. Rifles are rare these days. Maybe there was one in the house next door, but father wouldn't let them shoot anyway. He said we have

no need for it. When we leave for the shining house and the good people who meet us there take us to mother, then we can shoot all we want... Maybe it is you who is supposed to take us to mother? Then why don't you have a rifle? You're a good man, but you have no rifle, and father said that all good men have rifles...

"No," I say. "I can't take you to your mother. I am a stranger here and I want to meet the good people myself."

"Pity," Iyadrudan says.

We walk out into the square. Up close, "Spot 96" looks like a giant ancient jewelry box made of blue crystal in all its barbaric greatness, full of innumerable jewels and precious stones. Even whitish-blue light comes from within, lighting the cracked asphalt overgrown with the black stubble of weeds and the dead facades of houses on all sides of the square. The walls of this amazing building are completely transparent, and inside, there is a shining and whirling exciting chaos of red, gold, green, and yellow, so you don't right away see the wide, welcomingly open entrance with a few low steps leading up to it.

"Toys..." Pritulatan whispers ecstatically and starts wiggling, trying to crawl off me.

Only now do I understand that the jewelry box is full not of jewels, but of colorful toys, hundreds and thousands of colorful and extremely corny toys; absurdly huge brightly made-up dolls, ugly wooden toy trucks, and a great variety of brightly colored small things hard to make out from a distance.

The little high-aptitude Pritulatan immediately starts crying and begging for everyone to come into the magic house; it's okay that father said not to come in, we'll just come in for a moment, get that toy truck over there, and start waiting for the good people to come. Iyadrudan tries to stop him, first verbally, then, when it fails, by twisting his ear, and crying becomes inarticulate. The translator matter-of-factly pours out a large bag of "rat-eared snakes"; Vanderhuse's control room is agitated, demanding calming and consolation; then suddenly everyone, including the high-aptitude Pritulatan, gets quiet.

From around the nearest corner, appears our recently seen acquaintance, the local with a rifle. Softly and noiselessly moving over the spots of blue light, his hands on top of the rifle hanging across his chest, he walks straight up to the children. As to me and Schekn, he pays no attention. He firmly takes the now-quiet

Pritulatan by his left hand and the now-smiling Iyadrudan, by his right and leads them away, through the square, toward the shining building, to mother, father, and limitless opportunities to shoot as much as you want.

I look at their backs. Everything seems to go the way it's supposed to, but something small, some trivial little thing spoils the picture. The proverbial drop of tar in a barrel of honey...

"Did you recognize it?" Shekn asks.

"What exactly?" I reply, irritated, because I cannot get rid of this mysterious eyesore ruining the view.

"Turn off the lights in this building and shoot a canon at it a dozen times..."

I can barely hear him. I suddenly understand what this eyesore is. The local walks away holding children's hands, and I see how his rifle swings left and right as he is walking, like a pendulum. It can't possibly swing like this. A heavy magazine rifle, weighing at least eight kilos, would never rock so energetically. A toy rifle, wooden or plastic, would. This "good man" has a fake rifle...

I have no time to think it through. The local has a toy rifle. The locals are snipers. Could the toy rifle have come from the toy pavilion? Turn off the lights in this pavilion and shoot a canon at it a dozen times... It's an identical pavilion... No, there's no way to think it through on time.

On the left, bricks start falling, a wooden window frame falls down and cracks against the sidewalk. Along the ugly façade of a six-story building, the third one from the corner, a yellow shade is sliding down, so lightly and weightlessly that it's hard to believe it causes plaster and pieces of bricks to fall off the façade.

Vanderhuse is screaming something, the children are squealing in terror, and the shadow is already on the asphalt, still weightless, semi-transparent, and enormous. The mad shuffle of dozens of legs is almost imperceptible, and in this shuffle is a bulging long segmented body, carrying in front of itself the gleaming, as if lacquered, grabbing claws raised high...

The scorcher jumps into my hand by itself. I turn into an automatic distance meter, involved only in measuring the distance between the cancer-spider and the children running away from it across the square. (Somewhere over there, there's also the local with his fake rifle, also running as fast as he can, right behind the children, but I am not watching him.) The distance is quickly shrinking,

everything is clear, and when the cancer-spider gets into my sight, I shoot.

At the moment, it is twenty meters away. I don't get to shoot the scorcher very often, so the result shocks me. The reddish-purple flash blinds me for a moment, but I can still see that the cancer-spider seems to explode. All of it, from the claws to the tip of the hind leg. Like an overheated steam boiler. Then, a sharp bout of thunder, echoes start rolling all over the square, and a dense, as if solid, cloud of white seam swells up in place of the monster.

It's over. The steam cloud dissolves with a quiet hiss, panic screams and thundering of feet quiet down in the depth of a dark side street, and the jewelry box of the pavilion still shines its barbaric greatness in the middle of the square...

"Damn, that's scary," I mumble. "How did they get here, hundred parsecs from Pandora? And you haven't smelled it, have you?"

Schekn has no time to reply. A rifle shot sounds and echoes all over the square, then immediately another. Somewhere very close by. Possibly around the corner. Well, yes, from the side street where they all ran into...

"Schekn, keep to the left, don't expose yourself!" I command, already on the run.

I don't understand what could be happening in that side street. Most likely, another cancer-spider attacked the children. So the rifle isn't a toy? At that moment, three men emerge from the darkness of the side street and stop, blocking our passage. And two of them are armed with real automatic rifles, and the two barrels are pointed straight at me.

I can see everything very well in the bluish-white light; a tall gray-haired old man wearing a gray uniform with shining buttons, and at his sides and slightly behind, two strong-looking guys with rifles, also wearing gray uniforms, with ammo pouches on their belts.

"Very dangerous," Schekn clicks in the Bigheads language. "I repeat, very!"

I downshift from running to walking and make an effort to force myself to put the scorcher back into the holster. I stop in front of the old man and ask,

"What happened to the children?"

The rifle barrels are pointing at my stomach. In the gut. The guys' faces are sullen and completely merciless.

"The children are fine," says the old man.

His eyes are sparkling, as if he is amused. His face shows none of the armed guys' heavy sullenness. A normal creased face of an old man, not without some grace in it. Although I may be imagining it, simply because instead of a rifle, he is holding a shining polished cane, which he lightly taps on the side of his tall boot.

"Whom have you shot at?" I ask.

"A bad man," the translator interprets the reply.

"You must be the good people with rifles, then?" I ask.

The old man raises his eyebrows.

"Good people? What does that mean?"

I explain to him what Iyadrudan had explained to me. The old man nods.

"I see. Yes, we are the good people." He looks me over from head to toe. "You are not doing badly, it seems... A translating machine behind your back... We used to have those, but huge, filling whole rooms... And side arms like yours we never had... Nice shot! Like a cannon. When have you landed?"

"Yesterday," I say.

"Well, we were never able to fix our flying vehicles. No one to fix them. As you can see, a complete collapse. How did you manage? Fought them off? Or found some remedies?" He looks me over again. "Yes, you did good. And we here..."

"A complete collapse indeed," I say carefully. "I've been here for a full day, but still don't understand a thing."

It is clear that he mistakes me for someone else. Initially, it may actually be for the better. Only I have to tread carefully, very carefully...

"I know you don't understand a thing," the old man says, "and this is strange to say the least... Have you not experienced any of that?"

"No," I reply. "Nothing of the sort."

The old man suddenly bursts into a long tirade, to which the translator immediately responds with a message, "language cannot be decoded".

"I don't understand," I say.

"You don't? And I thought I spoke the language of Transmountainia fairly well."

"I am not from there," I object. "And I have never been there."

"Where are you from, then?"

I make a decision.

"That is not important," I say. "Let's not talk about us. We are

okay. We don't need help. Let's talk about you. I understand very little so far, but one thing is obvious; you need help. What kind? What are the most urgent needs? That's what we should talk about. And please, let's sit down; I've been walking all day. Do you have a place where we could sit down and talk calmly?"

For a time, he silently scans my face.

"You don't want to say where you're from..." he finally says. "Well, that's your right. You are stronger. Only that's stupid. I know you're from the Northern Archipelago. You weren't attacked because they didn't notice you. Good for you! But I want to ask, where have you been for the last forty years, while we here were rotting alive? You lived as you please, damn you!"

"You're not the only people dealing with this catastrophe," I object quite sincerely. "We just got around to you."

"We're very glad," he says. "Let's sit down and talk."

We enter a building on the other side of the square, walk up to the second floor, and arrive to an unclean room with sparse furnishings; a table in the middle, a huge couch by the wall, and two stools by the window. Windows are facing the square, and the room is lighted by the whitish-blue glow of the pavilion. Someone is sleeping on the couch, wrapped up into a cape. On the table, cans and a large metal canister.

Having barely entered the room, the old man starts issuing orders. He wakes up the sleeper and sends him away somewhere. One of the sullen guys is ordered to take up the post and sits down on a stool by the window, where he remains without taking his eyes off the square. The other sullen guy starts opening cans, then stands at the door, leaning onto the frame.

I am asked to sit on the couch; then the table, with cans all over it, is dragged in front of me. The canister turns out to contain water, quite clean, although there's a light iron taste to it. Schekn is not forgotten, either. The soldier that got raised from the couch puts an open can on the floor before him. Schekn doesn't object. He is not eating the food though; instead, he moves back toward the door and sits down next to the guard. He is deliberately scratching, snorting, and licking his chops, vigorously pretending to be a common dog. Meanwhile, the old man grabs the second stool, sits at the table opposite me, and the negotiations begin in earnest.

First of all, the old man introduces himself. Of course, he is a Gattaikh, and not just any Gattaikh, but Gattaikhokambomon,

which seemingly translates as “the ruler of the entire territory and adjacent regions.” He rules the entire city, the port, and a dozen tribes living within fifty kilometers. What is happening outside his territory, he doesn’t really know, but suspects it’s about the same as here. The population of his area is currently under five thousand. There is no industry in the area, nor is there any systematic agriculture. There is, however, a laboratory in the suburbs. A good one, used to be one of the best in the world, Draudan himself still runs it. (“It’s strange that you haven’t heard about him; he got lucky, turned out he is a long-lifer, just like I am...”) But they’ve made no breakthrough there in the last forty years. And they probably won’t make one.

“This is why,” the old man concluded, “we shouldn’t beat around the bush. And let’s not haggle, either. I have only one condition; if you can treat it, treat everyone. No exceptions. If that condition is acceptable, name your other conditions. Any conditions. I will accept them without questioning. If not, you better stay away. We will all die here, of course, but you will have no life, either, as long as at least one of us is alive.

I keep quiet. I keep waiting for the headquarters to suggest something. Anything! But they, it seems, are as clueless as I am.

“I would like to remind you,” I finally say, “that I still have no understanding of your situation.”

“So ask your questions!” the old man barks.

“You said, treat. Are you having an epidemic?”

He tiredly leans onto the table and rubs his forehead with his fingers.

“I warned you; do not beat around the bush. We are not going to haggle. Tell me one thing: do you have a universal cure? If you do, dictate your terms. If you don’t, we have nothing to talk about.”

“This way, we will never get anywhere,” I say. “Let’s assume that I don’t know anything about you. Say, I have slept through the last forty years. I don’t know what disease you’re suffering from, I don’t know which cure you need...”

“Nothing about the invasion?” the old man says, without opening his eyes.

“Almost nothing.”

“And nothing about the Great Abduction?”

“Almost nothing. I know that everyone left. I know that the aliens from outer space are somehow involved. Nothing else.”

“Ari-ens... From-out-er-space...” the old man laboriously repeats in Russian.

“People from the moon... People from the sky...” I say.

He bares solid yellow teeth.

“Not from the sky, and not from the moon. From the underground!” he says. So you do know something...”

“I walked through the city. Saw a lot.”

“And you had nothing like that? At all?”

“Nothing of the sort,” I say firmly.

“And you haven’t noticed anything? Haven’t noticed the extinction of the human race? Stop lying! What are you trying to achieve by those lies?”

“Lev!” Komov’s voice whispers inside my helmet. “Play the cretin scenario.”

“I have my orders,” I say solemnly. “I only know what I am supposed to know! I only do what I am ordered to do! If I am ordered to lie, I will, but right now, I am under no such orders.”

“So what are your orders?”

“To conduct reconnaissance in the area and report everything.”

“What utter nonsense!” the old man says with exhausted disgust.

“Oh well, have it your way. Whatever the reason, you want me to tell you what everyone knows... All right, listen.”

It turns out that those at fault are the disgusting race of creatures living beneath the planet’s surface. Forty years ago, that race undertook an invasion against the human race. It started with an unprecedented pandemic, which the non-humans unleashed on the entire planet. The agent that caused it still has not been identified. The disease manifested itself very simply; starting at age twelve, completely normal children began to age rapidly. After the critical age point, the development of human body accelerated geometrically. Sixteen-year-olds looked to be forty, old age began at eighteen, and very few lived past twenty.

The pandemic went on for three years, and then the non-humans first disclosed their existence. They offered all governments to relocate the population to “a neighboring world,” meaning their world underground. They promised that in that world, the pandemic will disappear by itself, so millions and millions of scared people ran into those special wells, never to be heard from again. Thus forty years ago ended the local civilization.

Of course, not everyone believed and not everyone was scared.

Whole families and religious communities stayed behind. Under the monstrous conditions of the pandemic, they continued their hopeless efforts to survive. However, the non-humans wouldn't leave alone even those pitiful few. They mounted a hunt for the children, for the last hope of the human race. They have flooded the planet with "bad people." The early ones were bad imitations of people, funny-looking ones with painted faces, ringing their tiny bells and playing cheerful songs. Silly little kids gladly followed them and disappeared in amber-colored "glasses". At the same time, the brightly lit toy stores appeared on major squares; a child would come in and disappear without a trace.

"We did all we could. We armed ourselves; there were plenty of weapons in the abandoned arsenals. We taught children to be afraid of the 'bad people', and then to destroy them using rifles. We tore down the cabins and shot point-blank at the toy stores, but then realized that a smarter way to handle it would be to put guards next to them and intercept the careless children at the threshold. But that was only the beginning..."

The non-humans kept sending new types of child hunters to the surface. First came the "monsters". It's almost impossible to hit one when it attacks a child. Then came the giant bright-colored butterflies; they fell on children, wrapped them in their wings, and disappeared. The butterflies are actually bulletproof. Finally, the most recent invention: the bastards indistinguishable from a common soldier. Those just take the unsuspecting kids by the hand and lead them away. Some even can talk.

"We know full well that we have practically no chances to survive. The pandemic is not abating, and we were hoping it would. Only one person out of hundred thousand remains unaffected. Myself, for example, or Draudan. There's another boy, I watched him grow up; he is eighteen, and he looks eighteen. If you didn't know any of this, you do now. If you did, keep in mind that we understand our situation. We are ready to agree to any conditions; we will work for you, we will be your subjects... Name your terms, but if you treat us, treat everyone. No elite, no chosen ones!"

The old man falls silent, reaches for a water mug, drinks greedily. The soldier standing by the door, shifts his weight from one foot to the other and yawns, covering his mouth with his hand. He looks about twenty-five. How old is he really? Thirteen? Fifteen? A teenager...

I sit still, trying to keep a stone face. Subconsciously, I expected something of the sort, but what I heard from a surviving eyewitness refuses to fit into my mind. I do not doubt the facts the old man mentioned, but it feels like a dream; each element taken separately is full of meaning, but everything put together looks like complete nonsense. Perhaps, the reason is that my very flesh and blood are affected by the preconceived notion about the Wanderers that we have on Earth?

“How do you know they are non-human?” I ask. “Have you seen them? You personally?”

The old man grunts. His face turns scary.

“I would give half of my pointless life to see one,” he utters in a hissing voice. “I would kill him with these bare hands... But, of course, I have not seen them. They are too careful and cowardly... It’s possible that no one ever saw them, except those stinking traitors from the government forty years ago. If you listen to rumors, they have no shape at all, like water or steam...”

“In that case, here’s what I find strange,” I say. “Why would shapeless beings want to lure several billion people into their dungeons?”

“Damn you!” the old man says in a raised voice. “They are *not human*! How can you and I judge what the non-humans need? Maybe slaves. Maybe food. Maybe construction materials. What difference does it make? They destroyed our world! Even now, they wouldn’t leave us alone, exterminating us like rats...”

Suddenly, his face is distorted by extreme fear. With an energy surprising for his age, he jumps away to the opposite wall, throwing away the stool, which lands with a loud bang. Before I could blink, he is holding a large nickel-plated revolver with both hands, pointing it straight at me. The sleepy guards wake up with the same expression of mistrust and horror on their faces and start groping for their rifles.

“What happened?” I say, trying not to move. The nickel-plated barrel shakes; the guards, finally in possession of their weapons, clatter the locks in unison.

“Your stupid clothes finally worked,” Schekn clicks in his language, “you are almost invisible. Only your face is visible. You have no shape, like water or steam. Although the old man already decided not to shoot you. Or should I take him out just in case?”

“Don’t,” I reply in Russian.

The old man finally makes a sound. He is whiter than a whitewashed wall and speaks with a stutter, but it's not fear, it's hatred that makes him stutter.

"You damned underground shape-shifter!" he says. "Put your hands on the table! Left on top of the right! Here you go..."

"This is a misunderstanding," I say angrily. "I am not a shape-shifter. I am wearing specially designed clothing. It can make me invisible, only right now it isn't working well."

"Oh, so it's clothing?" the old man says in a mocking tone of voice. "In the Northern Archipelago, they have learned how to make invisibility clothes?"

"In the Northern Archipelago, they have learned to do a lot of things," I say. "Put away your weapon, and let's sort it out calmly."

"You're a fool," the old man says. "You should have taken time to look at our maps. There is no Northern Archipelago. I figured you out right away, only I couldn't believe how brazen you were..."

"Isn't it humiliating?" Schekn clicks. "Okay, take the old one, and I'll handle both young ones..."

"Shoot the dog!" the old man commands, without taking his eyes off me.

"I'll show you the dog!" Schekn articulates in the clearest local tongue. "You babbling old goat!"

At this point, the boys' nerves give up, and shooting begins...
(20/31)

3 June 78

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Maya Glumova Again

I must have set the videophone's ringer level to "way too loud". The unit next to my head melodically roared like the stranger in short trousers in the middle of courting Mrs. Nickleby. I jumped out of the armchair, groping for the on button.

It was the Excellency calling. The time was 07:03.

"Enough sleeping," he said somewhat cordially. "When I was your age, I didn't have a habit of sleeping."

Until when, I wonder, am I to listen to him talking about my age? I am forty-five already... And, by the way, when he was my age, he did sleep. He's still not bad at it.

"I wasn't sleeping," I lied.

"Even better," he said. "Meaning, you can get to work right away. Find that Glumova woman. Find out if she saw Abalkin since yesterday. Whether Abalkin talked to her about work. If he did, what was he interested in? Did he express interest in dropping by the Museum? That's it. No more no less."

I reply to the code phrase,

"Find out from Glumova if she saw him again, if they talked about work; if they did, what was his interest, and has he expressed an intent to visit the Museum, right?"

"Right. Now, you wanted to change your cover. I have no objections. COMCON is looking for Progressor Abalkin to interview him regarding an accident. The investigation is related to a secret of identity and is thus conducted quietly. Any questions?"

"I would love to know what the Museum has to do with it..." I mumbled, as if to myself.

"Did you say something?" the Excellency inquired.

"Let's assume they didn't talk about that thrice-damned Museum. In that case, may I attempt to find out what actually happened between them at the first encounter?"

"Is it important to you?"

"What about you?"

"Me? Not at all."

"Very strange," I said, looking off to the side. "We know what Abalkin wanted to find out from me. We know what he wanted to find out from Mr. Fedoseyev. But we have no idea what he was trying to get out of Glumova..."

The Excellency said,

“All right. Find out. But be sure it doesn’t interfere with the primary objective. And don’t forget to put on your radio bracelet. In fact, put it on now, while I can see you...”

I sighed, took the bracelet out of a desk drawer and put it on my left wrist. The bracelet was too tight.

“All right,” said the Excellency and clicked off.

I proceeded to the shower. I could hear thunder and clang from the kitchen; Alyona was running the utilizer. The place smelled like coffee. I took a shower, and we had breakfast. Alyona, wearing my bathrobe, sat across the table from me looking like a Chinese Buddha. She announced she had a presentation today and offered to deliver it to me for rehearsal. I declined, citing the circumstances. “Again?” she asked with compassion, yet aggressively. “Again,” I replied, not without a challenge in my tone. “Damn,” she said. “Indeed,” I said. “Is it going to take long?” she asked. “I have three more days,” I said. “And if you don’t make it on time?” she asked. “Then it’s the end of everything,” I said. She gave me a fleeting look, and I realized she is yet again imagining all kinds of horrors. “It’s boring,” I said, “I’m tired of it. When I finish this case, let’s go somewhere far away.” “I can’t,” she said sadly. “Aren’t you tired?” I asked, “You guys aren’t doing anything important.” That was it; she bristled and set out to convince me that what she does is very interesting and very important. In the end, we agreed that we are going to Novaya Zemlya next month. It’s a fashionable destination these days...

I returned to the study and dialed Glumova’s home number without sitting down. No reply. It was 07:51. Bright sunny morning. In a weather like this, only our Elephant could sleep until eight. Maya Glumova might be off to work, and the freckled Toivo, back to his boarding school.

I thought of my schedule for today. In Canada, it is late evening now. As far as I know, the Bigheads are nocturnal, so it would be okay if I head over there in three or four hours. By the way, how is null-T today? I requested information. Null-transportation has resumed normal operation effective 4 AM. Meaning, I get to see both Schekn and Korney Yashmaa today.

I went to the kitchen, had another cup of coffee, and walked Alyona out to the roof, where her glider was parked. We said our goodbyes with an exaggerated cordiality; she was having pre-presentation jitters. I thoughtfully waved my hand at her until she disappeared

from sight, then returned to my study.

I wonder, what's up with the Museum? It's just a museum, after all... It is, of course, somewhat related to what the Progressors do, especially on Saraksh... Then I thought of the Excellency's pupils expanding to his entire irises. Was he really that scared? Have I really managed to scare the Excellency? And with what? An ordinary and random bit of information that Abalkin's girlfriend works at the Museum of Extraterrestrial Cultures. The Special Sector of Items of Unknown Purpose... Pardon me! He named the sector. I said, Glumova works at the Museum of Extraterrestrial Cultures, and he chimed in, the Special Sector of Items of Unknown Purpose... I thought back to rooms filled with rarities looking like abstract sculptures or topological models. Does the Excellency really think that an Imperial officer who did something shady a hundred parsecs away could be interested in anything those rooms house?

I dialed Glumova's office number and got a slight shock. Pleasantly smiling at me from the screen was Grisha Serosovin, aka Aquarius, a member of my department's Subgroup Four. For a few seconds, I was watching the change of expressions on his ruddy face. A pleasant smile, confusion, readiness to accept orders, and finally, the pleasant smile again. This time, with a forced look to it. That was understandable. If I was slightly shocked, he must have been, too. The head of his department was the last person he expected to see on this screen, but all things considered, he handled it well.

"Hello," I said. "Can I please speak to Maya?"

"Maya..." Grisha looked around. "She's not here. I think she's not in yet. Should I give her a message?"

"Tell her Kammerer called. I am a journalist, she might remember me. What about you? Are you new there?"

"Well, I started here yesterday... Actually, I don't work here; just studying some of the artifacts..."

"Ah," I said. "Well, thank you. I'll call again later."

Well, well, well. The Excellency is taking measures. Looks like he is certain that Abalkin is coming to the Museum. Specifically, to the Sector of those what-do-they-call-them Items. Let's see why he picked Grisha. Grisha is a newbie. Smart, good reflexes. An exobiologist by training. Maybe that's it. A young exobiologist commences his first independent study. Something along the lines of "The Relationship Between Artifact Topology And Sentient Being

Biostructure". Everything is quiet, peaceful, elegant, and decent. By the way, Grisha is also the department's champion in subacs... Okay. I think I get it. Never mind. Glumova, it seems, is held up somewhere. For example, having a conversation with Lev Abalkin somewhere. By the way, he wanted to meet with me at 10:00 today. He probably lied, but if I am to go see him, now is the time to call and find out if his plans have changed. I immediately called the Aspen.

Cottage number six responded immediately, and I saw Maya Glumova on screen.

"Ah, it's you," she uttered with disgust.

It was impossible to describe the grudge and disappointment on her face. She lost a lot of life force over the past day; her cheeks sunk in, shadows appeared under her eyes, miserable hurting eyes were wide open, her lips were chapped. Only a second later, when she slowly pulled away from the screen, did I notice that her gorgeous hair was nicely and somewhat coquettishly laid and that above her formal and elegant gray dress, she was wearing that amber necklace.

"Yes, it's me..." said Kammerer the journalist, confused. "Good morning. I actually... Well, is Lev there?"

"No," she said.

"Thing is, he set up a meeting with me... I wanted..."

"Here?" she asked immediately, pulling closer to the screen.

"When?"

"At ten o'clock. I just wanted to find out... And it turns out he's not here..."

"Did he really set up a meeting with you? What exactly did he say?" she asked childishly, looking at me intently.

"What did he say?" slowly repeated Kammerer the journalist.

Actually, it wasn't Kammerer the journalist anymore, it was I. "All right, Maya. Let's not delude ourselves. Most likely, he's not coming."

Now she looked at me as if not believing her eyes.

"What do you mean? How do you know?"

"Wait for me," I said. "I'll tell you everything. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"What happened to him?" she shouted in a shrill and scary voice.

"He's alive and well. Don't worry. Wait, I'm coming..."

Two minutes to dress. Three minutes to the nearest null-T cabin.

Damn, a line at the cabin. Friends, please, would you let me cut in front of you, it's very important... Thank you, thank you so much! All right. One minute to find the index. What are those indexes in the provinces anyway? Five seconds to enter the index, and I step out of the cabin into the empty log-walled front room of the resort clubhouse. For another minute, I stand on the porch looking around. Ah, that's where I need to go... I cut through the thick growth of rowans mixed with nettles. I should take care to avoid Dr. Goannek...

She was waiting for me in the front room, sitting at the low table with the toy panda on it, holding a videophone in her lap. I came in and automatically looked at the slightly ajar living room door and she said hurriedly,

"We'll talk here."

"As you wish," I replied.

Slowly and deliberately, I checked the living room, the kitchen, and the bedroom. All rooms have been cleaned and, of course, there wasn't anyone in any of them. She sat still, hands on the videophone, staring forward.

"Who were you looking for?" she asked coldly.

"I don't know," I admitted honestly, "but we're about to have a private conversation, and I wanted to make sure we're alone."

"Who are you?" she asked. "Just don't lie anymore."

I presented cover number two, explained what secret of identity means, and added that I am not apologizing for lying; I simply tried to do my job without putting her through undue stress.

"So now you've decided to drop the excess consideration?" she said.

"What else am I supposed to do?"

She didn't reply.

"So you are sitting here waiting," I said, "and he is not coming. He is fooling you. He is fooling everyone and there is no end to it in sight. Meanwhile, the time is running."

"Why do you think he is not coming back here?"

"Because he is on the run," I said. "Because he lies to everyone he talks to."

"So why did you call here?"

"Because I can't find him!" I said, getting angry little by little. "I have to grasp every chance, no matter how idiotically slim..."

"What did he do?" she asked.

"I don't know what he did. Maybe nothing. I am not looking for

him because he did something. I am looking for him because he is the only witness of a big trouble. And if we can't find him, we'll never find out what happened there..."

"Where is there?"

"That's not important," I said impatiently. "It's where he used to work. Not on Earth. On a planet called Saraksh."

Her facial expression showed that it was the first time she ever heard of a planet called Saraksh.

"So why is he on the run?" she asked quietly.

"We don't know. He is on the brink of mental breakdown. In a way, he's ill. It is possible he sees things that aren't there. It is possible he is obsessed."

"Ill..." she said, shaking her head slightly. "Maybe... And maybe not... What do you want from me?"

"Have you seen him again?"

"No," she said. "He promised to call, but never did."

"So why are you waiting for him here?"

"Where else am I supposed to wait for him?" she asked.

There was so much bitterness in her voice that I took my eyes off her and kept quiet for a while. Then I asked,

"Where was he going to call you, at work?"

"Probably... I don't know. First time, he called me at work."

"So he called you and said that he's coming to see you?"

"No. He asked me to come see him. I took a glider and flew over."

"Maya," I said, "I need to know the details of your first encounter... You told him about yourself, about your work. He told you about his. Try to remember how it happened."

She shook her head.

"No. We haven't talked about any of that... Yes, it's strange... We haven't seen each other in so many years... I only realized later, at home, that I hadn't found out anything about him. I kept asking, where have you been, what have you been doing? But he kept waving me off and yelling that it's all inconsequential nonsense..."

"So he asked you questions?"

"No, not at all! He wasn't interested in what I am or what I do. Whether I am single or in a relationship... What my life is like... He was like a boy... I don't want to talk about it."

"You don't have to talk about things you don't want to talk about..."

"I don't want to talk about anything!"

I got up, went into the kitchen, and brought her some water. She greedily drank the entire glass, spilling water onto her gray dress. "It's no one's concern," she said, handing the glass back to me.

"Don't talk about things that are no one's concern," I said, sitting down. "This said, what did he ask you about?"

"I keep telling you, he didn't! He told stories, drew pictures, argued... Like a little boy... He remembers everything! Almost every day! Where he stood, where I stood, what Rex said, the look on Wolf's face... I didn't remember any of that, and he kept yelling at me and made me remember, and I did... And he was very happy when I recalled something he didn't remember!"

She fell silent.

"Was it all about childhood?" I asked after a pause.

"But of course! I keep telling you, it's no one's concern, it's only mine and his! Although he did act crazy... I was running out of power, I kept falling asleep, and he would wake me up and shout in my ear, 'Who was it that fell from the swing?' And if I could remember it, he would pick me up, run all over the house with me in his arms, and scream, 'That's right, that's how it was, that's right!'"

"And he didn't ask you what has become of the teacher, of the school friends?"

"I keep trying to explain, he didn't ask anything about anyone! Can't you understand that? He recalled stories from the past and demanded that I recalled, too..."

"I understand," I said, "but what do you think he intended to do next?"

She looked at me as if I were Kammerer the journalist.

"No, you don't understand a thing," she said.

Overall, she was right. I got the answers the Excellency wanted; Abalkin showed no interest in Glumova's work, Abalkin did not intend to use her to break into the Museum. But indeed, I didn't understand the goal Abalkin pursued by arranging this twenty-four-hour trip down the memory lane. Sentimentality? A tribute to childhood love? Return to childhood? I believed none of that. The goal was practical, well thought out in advance, and Abalkin achieved it without making Glumova suspicious. It was clear to me that Glumova herself knows nothing about this goal. After all, she also failed to understand what actually happened...

There was something else I had to find out. All right, they talked

about the past, made love, drank, talked about the past again, fell asleep, woke up, made love again, fell asleep again... What, then, brought her to such desperation, to the fringes of hysteria? To be sure, there were all kinds of guesses to be made. For example, those related to the habits of a headquarters officer of the Island Empire. But it might well be something else. And that something else could well be important to me. I paused, undecided; should I leave behind something potentially important or commit a disgustingly tactless act that may or may not yield anything of substance...

I decided.

"Maya," I said, trying to articulate each word, "can you tell me what caused you to be so desperate when I last saw you?"

I enunciated the last phrase not daring to look her in the eye. I would not be surprised if she ordered me to get the hell out or simply smacked me over the head with the videophone. But she did neither.

"I was being stupid," she said fairly calmly. "A hysterical fool. At the time, I felt like he squeezed me out like a lemon and threw me away. But now I understand that he really can't be bothered with me. He has neither time nor energy to be tactful. I kept demanding explanations, but he couldn't explain anything. He probably knows you are looking for him..."

I got up.

"Thank you very much, Maya," I said. "I think you misunderstand our intentions though. No one wants to harm him. If you see him again, please try to impress that upon him."

She didn't answer.

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Something About The Excellency's Impressions

From the cliff, I could see that due to absence of patients, Dr. Goannek was engaged in fishing. This was fortuitous, because his log cabin with its null-T outhouse was closer than the resort's clubhouse. However, along the way there was an apiary, which I didn't see during my first visit, so now I had to save my skin jumping over decorative wicker fences and knocking over equally decorative clay pots and pitchers. In spite of that, everything ended well. I ran up to the porch with its carved decorations, came into the now-familiar living room, and called the Excellency without sitting down.

I hoped to get by with a short report, but the conversation ended up being fairly long, so I had to take the videophone out to the porch, so that the talkative and touchy Dr. Goannek wouldn't catch me unaware.

"Why is she sitting there?" asked the Excellency thoughtfully.

"She's waiting."

"Did he say he'd meet her?"

"As far as I understand, no."

"Poor thing," the Excellency grumbled. Then he asked, "Are you coming back?"

"No," I said. "I still have that Yashmaa fellow and the Bigheads' residence on my schedule."

"Why?"

"Living in that residence," I replied, "is a Bighead named Schekn-itrch, the one who participated in Operation Dead World with Abakin."

"So?"

"As far as I understand from Abalkin's report, they had quite an unusual relationship."

"Unusual in what way?"

I paused, searching for words.

"I would risk calling it a friendship, Excellency... Do you remember the report?"

"I do. I understand what you're saying. But tell me, how did you find out that Schekn the Bighead is residing on Earth?"

"Well, that was quite complicated. First, –"

"That's enough," he interrupted and fell silent, waiting for

something.

I didn't get it right away, but I did get it. Indeed, it was quite complicated for me, an agent of COMCON-2, with a substantial experience working the GWI, to locate Schekn. How complicated would it have been for Abalkin the Progressor, who spent the last twenty years in deep space and understands the GWI no more than a twenty-year-old college student!

"I agree," I said, "you're right, of course. But still, it's doable. If there's a will."

"I would agree. But there's something else, too. Do you think he is throwing rocks through the bushes?"

"No," I said honestly.

In our lingo, to throw rocks through the bushes means to lead the investigation down false trails, to plant bogus evidence, to deceive. Theoretically, it was possible that Lev Abalkin is pursuing a well-defined goal, while all his escapades – with Glumova, with the teacher, with me – is a masterfully organized collection of counterfeit material, intended only to have us waste time and lose focus trying to figure it out.

"It doesn't look like it," I said with determination.

"I have an impression that it does," the Excellency said.

"You're the boss," I said dryly.

"Indeed I am," he agreed, "but unfortunately, it is only an impression. I have no facts. However, if I am not mistaken, it is not highly likely that in his current situation, he would remember Schekn, expend the effort required to locate him, dash over to another hemisphere, and do some role-playing there, only to hurl another rock through a bush. Do you agree?"

"You see, Excellency, I don't know what his current situation is, and this is probably why I don't have the impression you do."

"So what's yours, then?" he asked with an unexpected interest.

I tried to put my impression into words.

"Anything but random rock throwing. There is some logic in his actions. They are all connected. Moreover, he keeps using the same trick over and over again; he shocks a person with a bold statement, then listens to what the shocked one mumbles... He wants to find out something about his life. More precisely, about his destiny. Something that has been hidden from him..." I fell silent, then said, "Excellency, he somehow found out that there is a secret of identity associated with him."

Then we both fell silent. The spotty bald crown rocked slightly on the screen. I felt like living through a historic moment. This was one of the rarest cases when my arguments (not facts I established, but arguments, logical conclusions) made the Excellency change his mind.

He looked up and said,

"All right. Go pay a visit to Schekn. But keep in mind you are most needed here, next to me."

"Yes, sir," I said and then asked, "How about Yashmaa?"

"He's not on Earth."

"Why?" I said, "he is on Earth, at Jan's Camp, near Antonov."

"He arrived on Giganda three days ago."

"I see," I said, trying my hand at sarcasm. "What a coincidence! Born on the same day as Abalkin, another posthumous child, marked by a number-"

"All right, all right," the Excellency grumbled. "Don't get distracted."

The screen switched off. I put the videophone back and came down to the yard. Then, I carefully made my way through the giant nettles, and, through Dr. Goannek's wooden outhouse, stepped into the rainy night on the banks of the Talon River.

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A Picket on the Talon River

The invisible river gurgled through the rustling of rain somewhere, very close by, under a cliff, and right in front of me, there was a softly lit metallic bridge, above which there was a large sign in Lincos, "Territory of the Bighead Nation." It was a little strange to see a bridge come right out of tall grass; there was no driveway leading to it, not even a lousy footpath. Two steps away from me, light was coming out of a single window of a low building looking like barracks or a cellblock. It made me think of Saraksh and its smells of rusting iron, dead bodies, and death waiting to pounce at you. Strange places we have here on Earth. You'd think you're home, safe and sound, everything is habitually nice, but no, sooner or later you will stumble on something that makes no sense... Oh well. What does Kammerer the journalist think about that building? Oh, it seems he has a very particular opinion of it. Kammerer found a door in a bulging wall, decisively pushed it, and entered a room with a vaulted ceiling, empty save for a desk, sitting behind which, his chin on his fists, was a long-haired youth, whose wavy hair and long tender face made him look like Alexander Blok wearing, upon an eccentric whim, a bright and colorful Mexican poncho. The youth's blue eyes gave Kammerer the journalist a look of complete disinterest and mild weariness.

"Nice architecture you've got here!" said Kammerer the journalist, shaking the rain drops from his shoulders.

"They like it," said Alexander B. indifferently, without changing his posture.

"No way!" said Kammerer the journalist sarcastically, looking around for something to sit down on.

There were no available chairs in the room, nor were there any armchairs, sofas, couches, or benches. Kammerer the journalist looked at Alexander B. Alexander B. looked at him with the same indifference as before, displaying no intent to be courteous or even polite. That was strange. Well, unusual. But it felt like around here, it was the norm.

Kammerer the journalist began to open his mouth to introduce himself, but Alexander B. tiredly lowered his long eyelashes down to his pale cheeks and with mechanical sincerity worthy of a robot

transporter began to recite from memory,
“Dear friend! I am sorry to inform you that you have made this trip in vain. Here, you will find absolutely nothing of interest. Whatever rumors you heard that made you come here are extremely exaggerated. The territory of the Bighead Nation may in no way be considered as an entertainment or educational venue. The Bigheads, which are truly remarkable, describe themselves as inquisitive, but not curious. The Bighead mission has a diplomatic status and cannot be a target of unofficial contacts, let alone idle curiosity. The most appropriate thing you can do now is to embark on a return trip and convincingly explain the situation here to all your associates.”

Alexander B. stopped talking and languidly lifted his eyelashes. Kammerer the journalist was still in front of him, which seemed to be of no surprise.

“Of course, before we say our goodbyes, I will answer any questions you may have.”

“Don’t you have to stand up while you’re at it?” Kammerer the journalist inquired.

Something resembling animation lit up the blue eyes.

“To be honest, I do,” Alexander B. admitted, “but I busted my knee yesterday, it still hurts, so you’ll have to excuse me...”

“Gladly,” said Kammerer the journalist and perched himself on the edge of the desk. “I see you are terrorized by the curious.”

“Since I started my watch today, you are the sixth party.”

“I am all alone!” Kammerer the journalist objected.

“Party is a unit of account,” objected Alexander B. animating even further, “like, say, a crate. A crate of canned food. Or a box of chocolates. It is entirely possible that there is only one chocolate in a box. All alone.”

“A very satisfactory explanation,” said Kammerer the journalist, “but I am not a curious passerby. I am here on business.”

“Eighty-three percent of all parties,” immediately responded Alexander B., “arrive here on business. The last party of five, including underage children and a dog, were seeking the Bighead language lessons. But mostly, the visitors are xenofolklore collectors. What a fad! Everyone collects xenofolklore. I collect xenofolklore too. But the Bigheads have no folklore! It is a canard! That jester Long Mueller published a book, Ossian-style, and everybody went nuts. ‘Oh ye hairy trees of thousand tails,

hiding your sorrowful thoughts in your trunks, fuzzy and warm! Thousands of thousands tails you have, but not a single head!’ The Bigheads, meanwhile, don’t have a concept of a tail. Their tail is an orientation organ, so if you wanted to translate adequately, you’d say a compass, not a tail. ‘Oh ye trees of thousand compasses!’ But I see you are not a folklorist.”

“No,” honestly admitted Kammerer the journalist, “I am much worse. I am a journalist.”

“Are you writing a book about the Bigheads?”

“In a sense. Why?”

“No reason. You’re welcome to it. You’re not the first, nor the last. Have you ever seen the Bigheads?”

“Yes, of course.”

“On screen?”

“No. The thing is, I discovered them on Saraksh...”

Alexander B. started getting up.

“So you’re Kammerer?”

“At your service.”

“Oh no, it is I who is at your service, doctor! Order, require, command...”

I immediately thought back to the conversation between Kammerer and Abalkin and quickly explained,

“I only discovered them, and that was it. I am not an expert in the Bigheads. And I am not interested in the Bigheads in general, only in one of them, the mission’s interpreter. So if you have no objections... Can I go over to their side?”

“Have mercy on me, doctor!” Alexander B. threw up his hands.

“You seem to think that we are sitting here to guard the place.

Noting of the sort! Come through, please! Many do exactly that. You’d explain to them that the rumors are exaggerated, they nod their heads, say goodbye, step out of the building, and off they go across the bridge...”

“Really?”

“And then they come back. Disappointed. Have not seen anything or anyone. Forests, hills, ravines, charming landscapes-all of that, but no Bigheads. First, the Bigheads are nocturnal, second, they live underground, and most importantly, they meet only with those they want to meet with. That’s why we keep watch here, as liaisons...”

“And who are the ‘we’?” asked Kammerer the journalist.

“COMCON?”

“Yeah. Interns. We keep watch here one at a time. Handling the communications both ways... Which of the interpreters do you want?”

“I need Schekn-itrch.”

“Let’s try it. Does he know you?”

“I doubt it. But tell him I want to talk to him about Lev Abalkin, whom he definitely knows.”

“No doubt about it,” said Alexander B. and pulled the intercom toward himself.

Kammerer the journalist (and, to be honest, I myself as well), with admiration bordering reverence, watched the youth with a tender face of a romantic poet wildly roll his eyes, fold his fine lips into an unthinkable pipe, and click, quack, and hoot like thirty-three Bigheads at once, in a dead night forest by a road with broken concrete pavement under the dully phosphorescent sky of Saraksh. The sounds seemed very appropriate in this empty prison-like room with its vaulted ceiling and rough bare walls. Then he stopped and cocked his head listening to the series of clicks and hoots that came in response; his lips and lower jaw continued to move in a strange way, as if he kept them ready to continue the conversation. The look of it was rather unpleasant, so Kammerer the journalist, in spite of his reverence, thought it best to look away.

The conversation, however, did not last too long. Alexander B. leaned back in his chair and skillfully massaging his lower jaw with his long pale fingers said, slightly out of breath,

“I think he agreed. However, I don’t want to give you any false hopes; I am not at all sure that I got it all. I caught two layers of meaning, but I think there was also a third... Anyway, go straight across the bridge, there will be a footpath. The footpath will lead you to the forest. He will meet you there. Well, actually, he will look at you first... No, that’s not right, either. You know, understanding a Bighead is not as difficult as translating him. Take that slogan of theirs, ‘we are inquisitive, but not curious,’ a great translation, by the way. ‘We are not curious’ can be taken to mean ‘we do not practice idle curiosity’ and at the same time, as ‘we are of no interest to you.’ You see?”

“I do,” said Kammerer the journalist getting off the desk. “He’ll take a look at me and then decide if he should talk to me. Thank you for going into the trouble for me.”

“It wasn’t a trouble, it was my pleasant duty... Wait, take my raincoat, it’s pouring outside...”

“Thanks, I’ll be okay,” said Kammerer the journalist and walked out into the rain.

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Schekn-itrch, a Bighead

Local time was around three o'clock in the morning, the sky was cloudy, and the forest was thick, so this nighttime world seemed to be gray, flat, and blurred, like a bad old photograph.

As was to be expected, he detected me first, and probably tracked me for five, if not ten, minutes hiding in the thick undergrowth.

When I finally noticed him, he realized it almost instantaneously and immediately walked out onto the path in front of me.

"I am here," he announced.

"I see," I said.

"We'll talk here," he said.

"All right," I said.

He immediately sat down, just like a dog talking to his master, a large heavy bigheaded dog with little triangular ears raising straight up and large round eyes under a massive wide forehead. His voice was a little raspy, and he spoke without a slightest accent, so only short phrases and slight over-enunciation betrayed his being an alien. And he smelled, too. But not like a wet dog as you would expect; the smell was rather inorganic, something like hot colophony. Strange smell, reminiscent rather of a machine than of a living creature. On Saraksh, if memory serves, the Bigheads smelled very differently.

"What do you need?" he asked bluntly.

"Have you been told who I am?"

"Yes. You are a journalist, writing a book about my people."

"Not exactly. I am writing a book about Lev Abalkin. You know him."

"All my people know Lev Abalkin."

That was news.

"So what do your people think about Lev Abalkin?"

"They don't think about Lev Abalkin. They know him."

It seemed the linguistic swamps started here.

"I meant, how do your people feel about Lev Abalkin?"

"They know him. Each one of them. Since birth until death."

Kammerer the journalist and I thought it best to change the subject. We asked,

"What can you tell me about Lev Abalkin?"

"Nothing," he answered succinctly.

I was afraid of that. To such a degree that I subconsciously rejected the very possibility of it happening and was completely unprepared for this turn. I was pathetically confused, while he brought his front paw up to his face and started to clean between his claws. Not in a canine way, but in a way our cats sometimes do it. However, I quickly got a grip on myself. It occurred to me that if the doggy sapiens didn't want to have anything to do with me, he would simply avoid the encounter.

"I know that Lev Abalkin is your friend," I said. "You lived and worked together. A lot of people here on Earth would like to know what Abalkin meant to his Bighead friend and co-worker."

"Why?" he asked, still succinct.

"Knowledge," I said.

"Useless knowledge."

"There is no useless knowledge."

He started working on another paw and in a few seconds he grumbled unintelligibly,

"Ask specific questions."

I paused to think.

"I know the last time you worked with Abalkin was fifteen years ago. Have you worked with other Earth people since?"

"Yes. A lot."

"Have you felt a difference?"

When I asked the question, I didn't mean anything specific. But Schekn suddenly froze, then slowly lowered his paw and raised his large head. For a second, his eyes flashed a dim red light. And then, he got busy with his claws again.

"Hard to say," he said. "Different jobs, different people. Hard."

He was avoiding something. What was it? My innocent question made him stumble. He was lost for an entire second. Or is it linguistics again? Well, linguistics can be a good thing. Let's use it to attack. Head-on.

"You saw him," I announced, "he invited you to work with him again. You agreed?"

This could mean, "If you saw him and he invited you to work with him again, would you agree?" Or it could be interpreted as, "You have seen him and he invited you to work with him again; have you agreed?" Linguistics. I won't argue, it was a fairly pathetic move, but what else did I have left to do?

And linguistics suddenly worked.

“He didn’t invite me to work,” Schekn objected.

“What did you two talk about then?” I marveled, building on the breakthrough.

“The past,” he grumbled, “not interesting.”

“What did he intend to do?”

“Don’t know.”

“What did he say to you? Every word he said is important to me.”

And then Schekn assumed a strange (I would even say unnatural) pose. He squatted on tensed legs, stretched out his neck, and stared up at me. Then, slightly rocking his heavy head left and right, he said, carefully enunciating every word,

“Listen carefully, understand correctly and remember firmly. The Earth people do not interfere in the affairs of the Bighead people. The Bighead people do not interfere in the affairs of the Earth people. This is how it was, how it is, and how it will be. The affairs of Lev Abalkin are affairs of the Earth people. This has been decided. Thus, do not look for what doesn’t exist. The Bighead people will not grant asylum to Lev Abalkin.”

Wow! I blurted,

“He asked for asylum? With you?”

“I only said what I said; the Bighead people will not grant asylum to Lev Abalkin. Nothing else. Did you understand that?”

“I did. But I am not interested in that. I repeat my question: what did he say to you?”

“I will answer. But first, repeat the important thing I told you.”

“All right, I’ll repeat. The Bighead people would not interfere in Abalkin’s affairs and would refuse him asylum? Is that right?”

“Yes. And that’s the important thing.”

“Now answer my question.”

“Here’s your answer. He asked me if there is a difference between him and other people I worked with. Same question you asked.”

Barely finished, he turned around and slipped away into the undergrowth. Not a single branch moved, not a single leaf, but he was no longer there. He disappeared.

Way to go, Schekn! “I taught him to speak the language and to use the Delivery Line. I was at his side when he got sick with his alien diseases, of which our physicians were not able to make any sense. I tolerated his bad manners, put up with his inconsiderate remarks, forgave him for doing things that I wouldn’t forgive anyone else... If I had to, I would fight for Schekn as I would for an Earthman, as I

would for myself. What about Schekn? I don't know." Way to go, Schekn-itrch!

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The Excellency Is Pleased

“Very curious!” the Excellency said when I finished my report.

“You were right to insist upon a visit to that zoo.”

“I don’t get it,” I replied, picking burdocks off my wet pants with a great deal of irritation. “Do you?”

“Yes.”

I stared at him.

“You seriously think Lev Abalkin would ask for asylum?”

“No. I don’t think that.”

“So what is it that you see in this? Or is it another rock thrown into a bush?”

“Possibly. But that’s not the point. It is unimportant what Lev Abalkin meant. The important thing is how the Bigheads reacted. However, you shouldn’t wreck your brain over it. You brought me important information. Thank you. I am pleased. So you should be pleased too.”

I returned to the burdocks. What can I say, he really was pleased. His green eyes gleamed, it was noticeable in the semi-darkness of his office. That’s how he looked at me when I, young, excited, and out of breath, reported to him that Presht the Meek has been captured red-handed and is now sitting in a car downstairs with a gag in his mouth, ready to spill his guts. It was I who captured the Meek, but at the moment, I didn’t understand what the Wanderer knew full well: it was the end of the sabotage, and trains full of grain will start going to the capital city tomorrow...

And now he also understood something I didn’t know, only I felt no satisfaction. I didn’t capture anyone, no one was waiting with a gag in his mouth to be interrogated; instead, a mysterious man with a maimed life ran back and forth all over the enormous affectionate Earth, as if he couldn’t sit still, as if he were poisoned, and by doing that, he poisoned everyone he saw with desperation and grudge, committed betrayals and became a victim of betrayal himself.

“Mak, allow me to remind you again,” the Excellency suddenly said in a quiet voice, “that he is dangerous. All the more so because he doesn’t know he is.”

“What is he, damn it?” I asked “An insane android?”

“An android can’t have a secret of identity,” the Excellency said.

“Don’t get distracted.”

I shoved the burdocks into a jacket pocket and sat up.

“For now, you can go home,” the Excellency said. “Until nineteen hundred hours, you are free. After that, remain close by, within the city limits, and wait for my call. It is possible that tonight he will attempt to break into the museum. If he does, we’ll apprehend him.”

“Okay,” I said with no enthusiasm.

He looked at me appraisingly.

“I hope you’ve kept in shape,” he said. “There will be only two of us to apprehend him, and I am way too old for that kind of exercise.”

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Museum of Extraterrestrial Cultures at Night

At 01:08, the radio bracelet on my wrist beeped, and the Excellency muffled voice said quickly, "Mak, museum, main entrance, quick..." I closed the cabin dome and turned on the engine in the high-power mode. The glider took off into the starry sky. Three seconds to brake. Twenty-two seconds to glide and map the descent. Star Square is empty. There isn't anybody in front of the main entrance. Strange... Aha! From a null-T cabin on the corner of the Museum building, emerged a thin black figure. Moving to the main entrance. That would be the Excellency.

The glider quietly landed in front of the main entrance. Right away, an indicator light flashed on the control panel, and a soft voice of the cyber-inspector said reproachfully, "Is it not permitted to land gliders on Star Square..." I opened the dome and jumped out. The Excellency was at the door, fiddling with a magnetic pick. "Is it not permitted to land gliders..." the cyber-inspector continued to broadcast.

"Shut it up," the Excellency said through his teeth without turning. I closed the dome. At the same time, the main entrance opened. "Follow me!" the Excellency commanded and dove into the darkness.

I dove after him. Just like in the old times.

He was running ahead of me in enormous silent hops, tall, thin, gangly, once again light and agile, clad in black, looking like a shadow of a medieval demon, and I thought that none of the newbies has ever seen the Excellency perform this way; maybe the Elephant has, and Peter Angelov, and I – fifteen years ago.

He was leading me along a complicated serpentine curve from room to room, from hallway to hallway, perfectly finding his way between the walls and display cases, among statues and mockups that looked like ugly mechanisms and mechanisms and automatons that looked like ugly statues. Not a ray of light anywhere (the lighting was probably shut off ahead of time), but he has not made a single mistake, although I know his night vision is much worse than mine. He prepared for this night run very well, and so far everything was working out quite nicely, except his breathing. He was breathing too loudly, but there was nothing to be done about

it. Age. Damned years.

Suddenly, he stopped and as soon as I caught up to him, he put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed lightly. For a moment, I was afraid he was having a heart attack, but then I realized that we have arrived and he is simply catching his breath.

I looked around. Empty workbenches. Shelving along the walls, full of alien curiosities. Xenographic projectors near the far wall. I've seen this before. I've been here before. That was Maya Glumova's shop. That's her desk over there, and here's the chair Kammerer the journalist sat in...

The Excellency let go of my shoulder, stepped over to the shelves, bent over and walked a few paces without straightening up, looking for something. Then he stopped, laboriously lifted something up, and walked over to the workbench located right in front of the entrance. Slightly leaning back, he carried in his hands an elongated artifact, a flat bar with rounded corners. Carefully, without a quietest knock, he laid the artifact on the workbench, paused a moment, and then, like a magician, pulled out of his breast pocket a large shawl with frills. With a swift move, he unfolded it and threw it over the bar. Then he turned to me, bent down to my ear and barely audibly whispered,

"When he touches the scarf, take him. If he sees us before he sees it, take him. Stand here."

I stood at one side of the door, the Excellency, at the other.

For a while, I couldn't hear a thing. I stood pressing my back into the wall, imagining different versions of what might transpire, and looked at the headscarf spread over the workbench. I wonder, why would Lev Abalkin want to touch it? If he wants the bar, how will he find out that it is hidden under the headscarf? And what is that bar anyway? Looks like a carrying case for a portable intravisor. Or for a musical instrument. Well, not really; too heavy. I don't get it. It's definitely a lure, but if it is a lure, it's not one that could easily attract a human being...

Then I heard the noise. The noise was substantial; somewhere in the bowels of the Museum, something large and metallic fell down, breaking into pieces in midair. I immediately thought about the giant coil of barbed wire tirelessly tended to by young women with molecular soldering guns the other day. I looked at the Excellency. The Excellency was also listening and also wondering.

The racket gradually ceased, and the silence fell again. Strange. A

Progressor, a professional, a master of hiding, a ninja, blundering into such an enormous contraption? Impossible. Well, he could have snagged his sleeve on a single wire sticking out... Nah, he couldn't. Not if he's a Progressor. Or did he already get sloppy on the safe Earth? Doubtful. Well, we'll see. At any rate, he must have frozen in place, standing on one foot and listening, and so he will listen for another five minutes or so...

Nope, no standing on one foot and listening. He was obviously approaching, and his approach was accompanied by a cacophony of noises, varying and completely unbecoming of a Progressor. He limped and dragged the soles of his shoes on the floor. He bumped into doorjambs and walls. Once, he collided with a piece of furniture and uttered a series of unintelligible mutterings full of hissing sounds. And when pale reflections of electric light fell onto the projector screens, I no longer had any doubts.

"It's not him," I said to the Excellency almost aloud.

The Excellency nodded. He looked gravely perplexed. Now he was standing with his side to the wall, facing me, legs apart, head down, and it was easy to imagine that in about a minute, he would grab the Progressor impersonator by the front of his clothes and roar into his face while shaking him, "Who are you and what are you doing here, you trifling son of a bitch?"

I was so clearly imagining this that at first I didn't even think twice about the Excellency pulling on the side of his jacket with his left hand, while using his right to holster his favorite .26 Herzog; he was making both hands available for the imminent grabbing and shaking.

But then it hit me; all this time, he stood there with an eight-shot death in his hand. I froze. This could only mean one thing; the Excellency was ready to kill Lev Abalkin. The Excellency never picked up a weapon to intimidate, threaten, or impress: only to kill. I was so disoriented that I forgot about the world around me. But then the shop was lit by a thick column of bright white light, and the faux Abalkin came in, bumping into the doorjamb one last time. Actually, he even looked a little like Lev Abalkin; well-built, not very tall, long black hair hanging to his shoulders. He wore a loose white raincoat and held a flashlight in one hand; in his other hand was something that looked like a small suitcase or a large satchel. He came in and stopped, ran the light along the shelves, and said, "Well, it must be here."

His voice was squeaky and his tone, artificially enthusiastic. People talk to themselves in that tone when they feel scared, awkward, or slightly ashamed; in other words, when they feel out of place, “one foot in the ditch,” as the Honti call it.

Now I was able to see that the man was old. Possibly even older than the Excellency. He had a long sharp nose, long sharp chin, hollow cheeks and high, and very pale, forehead. Overall, he looked more like Sherlock Holmes than Lev Abalkin. So far, there was only one thing certain about this man; I have never seen him before in my life.

He looked around, walked up to the workbench, put his suitcase-or-satchel on the flowery headscarf right next to our bar, and proceeded to inspecting shelf after shelf, section after section. While at it, he constantly muttered to himself, but I only could make out isolated words, “Well, everyone knows that... Blah, blah, blah... Common illisium... Blah, blah, blah... Crap and crap... Blah, blah, blah... Maybe it’s out of place... They put it away, stuffed it somewhere, hid it... Blah, blah, blah...”

The Excellency observed the motions holding his hands behind his back; on his face, there was an expression of hopeless fatigue or perhaps mortal boredom, as if he were looking at something immeasurably bothersome, a plague of his life and at the same time something that he knows would never go away, something to which he long since yielded and lost all hope of deliverance. At first, I was surprised that he abandoned his intent to grab and shake. But now, looking into his face, I understood there was no point in it. Shake or not, nothing would change; he will continue to crawl around looking for something, mutter, stand with one foot in the ditch, knock over museum displays, and render ineffective the best prepared and thought out operation plans.

When the old man made it to the farthest section, the Excellency sighed heavily, walked over to the workbench, perched on its edge, and said cantankerously,

“What are you trying to find there, Bromberg? The detonators?”

The old man Bromberg emitted a high-pitched yelp and jumped aside knocking over a chair.

“Who’s there?” he screamed, feverishly swinging his light from side to side, “Who is it?”

“It’s me, just me!” the Excellency replied even more cantankerously. “Stop shaking, will you?”

“Who? You? What the devil?” The light found the Excellency.

“Ah! Sikorski! I knew it!”

“Put away your flashlight,” the Excellency ordered, shielding his face with a palm of his hand.

“I knew it was you!” screamed the old man Bromberg. “I realized right away who is hiding behind this whole spectacle!”

“Put away your flashlight, or I’ll break it!” the Excellency barked.

“Would you stop screaming at me?” Bromberg yelled, but pointed the flashlight away nevertheless. “And don’t you dare touching my briefcase!”

The Excellency got up and started walking toward him.

“Don’t you dare to approach me!” Bromberg screamed. “I am not a youngster! You should be ashamed of yourself! You’re an old man!”

The Excellency walked up to him, took away his flashlight, and put it on the nearest table, lens up.

“Sit down, Bromberg,” he said. “We need to talk.”

“Those talks of yours...” Bromberg grumbled and sat down.

Amazingly, he was completely calm now. An energetic, venerable old man. I would even say cheerful.

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Isaac Bromberg. The Battle of Iron Sages

“Let’s try to talk calmly,” the Excellency offered.

“All right, let’s try!” Bromberg replied enthusiastically. “And who is that young man leaning against the wall by the door? Your bodyguard? You have a bodyguard now?”

The Excellency didn’t answer right away. He could say, “Maxim, you are dismissed,” and off I would go. But it would offend me, and the Excellency definitely understood that. I admit, however, that he might have had other concerns. At any rate, he made a slight gesture in my direction and said,

“This is Maxim Kammerer, an agent of COMCON. Maxim, this is Dr. Isaac Bromberg, a historian of science.”

I bowed, and Bromberg immediately said,

“I knew it. Of course, you were afraid you wouldn’t be able to handle me on your own, Sikorski... Sit down, young man, sit down, and get comfortable. Knowing your supervisor, it will be a very long conversation...”

“Sit down, Mak,” said the Excellency.

I sat in the familiar visitor’s chair.

“So I am waiting for your explanations, Sikorski,” Bromberg said.

“What is the meaning of this ambush?”

“I see you’re scared.”

“What nonsense!” Bromberg flared up. “Baloney! Thank God, I am not easily scared! And if someone can scare me, Sikorski-”

“But you made that terrible sound and knocked over so much furniture...”

“Well, you know, if someone shouted into your ear in an absolutely empty building at night...”

“There is absolutely no reason to go into an absolutely empty building at night...”

“First off, this is absolutely none of your business, Sikorski, where and when I go! And secondly, when else would I come? During the day, they do some suspicious repairs, some nonsensical exposition changes. Listen, Sikorski, admit it, it was your idea to close access to the Museum! I urgently had to refresh my memory on something. I came here. They wouldn’t let me in. Me! A member of this Museum’s Board of Scholars! I called up the curator, what’s happening? The curator, Grant Khochikian, the nicest man, in some

way a student of mine... The poor guy faltered, his face red with shame... He couldn't help me, he promised! He was asked by some highly respected people, and he promised! I am curious, who was it that asked him? Perhaps one Rudolph Sikorski? No! Oh no! No one has even heard of Rudolph Sikorski! But you can't fool me! I figured out right away whose ears are sticking out from behind it all. And I would like to know, Sikorski, why you wouldn't answer my question. Why did you have to do all this, I ask? The closure of the Museum! A pitiful attempt to withdraw artifacts from the Museum! Nighttime ambushes! And who, devil take him, turned off the electricity in here? I don't know what I would do if I didn't have a flashlight in my glider! I am going to have a bruise right here, damn it! And I knocked something over back there! I hope, I want to hope, it was just a mockup... Pray to God, Sikorski, that it was just a mockup, because if it is an original, you will personally put it back together! To the last wedding! And if that last wedding goes missing, you will personally go to Tagora—"

His voice broke off, and he started coughing, knocking on his chest with both fists.

"Will I ever have my questions answered?" he hissed furiously between coughs.

It was like watching a theatrical performance; the overall impression was rather comical, but then I looked at the Excellency and was shocked.

The Excellency, the Wanderer, Rudolph Sikorski, a mountain of ice, a frost-covered granite monument to self-control, a faultless mechanism of information gathering, turned the color of dark blood; he was breathing heavily, he impulsively clenched and unclenched his bony pigmented fists, and his famous ears flamed and slightly twitched. Although he still controlled himself, he alone knew how difficult it was.

"I would like to know, Bromberg," he said in a muffled voice, "why you need the detonators."

"You would, wouldn't you?" Dr. Bromberg hissed sarcastically and leaned forward, looking into the Excellency's face so closely that his long nose was almost in my boss' teeth, "Well, what else would you like to know about me? Perhaps you're interested in my stool? Or my conversation with Pilguy the other day?"

I didn't like the mention of Pilguy in this context. Pilguy worked on biogenerators, and my department was working on Pilguy's case for

over a month now. The Excellency, however, let Pilguy slip. He also leaned forward, so fast that Bromberg barely had time to lean back. "You would do well to take an interest in your own stool!" he roared. "And I would like to know why you allow yourself to break into the Museum and why you keep trying to get your hands on the detonators in spite of being clearly told that for the next few days-" "Are you trying to criticize my behavior? Ha! And who? Sikorski! Accusing me of breaking and entering? I'd like to know how you got in! Huh? Answer!"

"It's irrelevant, Bromberg!"

"You are a burglar, Sikorski!" Bromberg announced, pointing his long knobby finger at the Excellency, "You've sunk all the way down to burglary!"

"It is you who has sunk down to burglary, Bromberg!" the Excellency roared, "You! You were clearly and unambiguously told that the access to the Museum is suspended! Any normal person in your situation-"

"When a normal person faces another act of secret government action, their duty is-"

"Their duty is to use their brain, Bromberg! Their duty is to figure out they are not living in the Dark Ages. If they are facing a secret, it is not someone's caprice or ill will-"

"Indeed, not a caprice nor ill will, but your stunning arrogance, Sikorski, your laughable, truly medieval, idiotically fanatical conviction that you get to decide what is to remain hidden and what is to be disclosed! You are a very old man, Sikorski, but you never understood that this is first and foremost immoral!"

"It is ridiculous to talk about morals with a man who can commit burglary just to satisfy his childish need to protest! You are not just an old man, Bromberg, you are a pitiful old geezer regressing into childhood!"

"Wonderful!" Bromberg said, suddenly calming down again. He reached into the pocket of his white raincoat, took out something little and shiny, and laid it on the table in front of the Excellency with a bang. "Here is my key. As any other person associated with this Museum, I am entitled to a key to the service entrance, and I used it to come here-"

"In the middle of the night and in spite of a direct order by the curator?" The Excellency had no key, he had a magnetic pick, so the only way to get out of this one was to attack.

"In the middle of the night, but with a key! And where is your key, Sikorski? Please show me your key!"

"I don't have a key! I don't need one! I am here on an official business, not because I have an urge to act, you old hysterical fool!" And then it started in earnest. I am sure these walls have never before heard such eruptions of hoarse roaring mixed with screeching screams. Such epithets. Such bacchanalia of emotions. Such absurd arguments and even more absurd counterarguments. But forget the walls! Those were the walls of a quiet scholarly establishment, far removed from passions of life. But even I, far from being young, having seen a lot, even I have never heard anything of the sort, not from the Excellency anyway.

Most of the time, the battlefield was covered with smoke, in which the subject of the argument could no longer be seen, and, like red-hot cannonballs, flying both ways were all kinds of "irresponsible blabbers," "feudal knights of cloak and dagger," "neighborhood provocateurs," "pilgarlic agents of secret services," "sclerotic demagogues," and "secret jailers of ideas." Less exotic "old donkeys," "poisonous morels," and "senile idiots" of all kinds, meanwhile, rained like shrapnel...

Sometimes, however, the veil of smoke would lift, and then I, amazed and mesmerized, would see some truly fascinating retrospectives. I understood that the battle I accidentally observed was just one of the countless skirmishes in a quiet war which began back when my parents were graduating from school.

I fairly quickly recalled who Isaac Bromberg was. Needless to say, I have heard of him before, perhaps all the way back when I, then a snotty boy, worked for the Free Search Group. I have definitely read one of his books, *How It Really Happened*, a history of the Massachusetts Nightmare. As I recall, I didn't like the book; too much pamphleteering, too much effort put into tearing romantic covers off of that really scary story, too much room given to discussing the principles of dangerous experimentation policy, a discussion in which I had no interest at the time.

In some circles, however, Bromberg's name was known and respected. He could be described as the "extreme Left" within the Juidist movement, founded a long time ago by Lamondois himself and proclaiming the right of science to develop without interference.

The extremists within that movement subscribe to principles that

are completely natural at a first glance, but completely untenable in practice at any given level of human civilization's development. (I still remember the shock I experienced when I read up on the history of Tagora civilization, where those principles have been upheld steadfastly since the time of their first industrial revolution). Every scientific discovery that can be made will be made. This is hard to debate, although there are a number of caveats even at this stage. But what do you do with a discovery that has already been made? The answer: you contain the consequences. Very nice. But what if we can't foresee all consequences? What if we overestimate some consequences and underestimate others? What if we cannot contain even the most obvious and the most unpleasant consequences? What if such containment requires unimaginable amounts of energy and moral exertion (which, by the way, was exactly what happened to the Massachusetts machine, when the bewildered researchers realized they are witnessing the birth of the Earth's new un-human civilization)?

Stop the works, the World Council usually orders in those cases. No way, the extremists respond. Strengthen the controls? Yes. Allocate the energy required? Yes. Risk it? Yes! After all, "he who neither drinks nor smokes will die a healthy death" (a quote from a speech given by J.G. Prenson, the patriarch of the extremists). But no prohibitions! Morally driven prohibitions in science are more dangerous than ethical conflicts that arise, or can arise, as a result of the riskiest turns of the scientific progress. This viewpoint never fails to find followers among young scientists, but it is very dangerous when subscribed to by a major talent who has at his disposal a talented crew and substantial amounts of energy. Those practicing extremists were our primary customers at COMCON-2. The old man Bromberg, meanwhile, was a theorizing extremist and this is probably why I have not heard of him so far. The Excellency, however, as I could clearly see, had him in his kidneys, liver, and gall bladder his entire life.

It is not our job at COMCON-2 to prohibit anything to anyone. For that, we don't know enough science. It is the World Council that hands out the prohibitions. Our job is to enforce those prohibitions and plug up information leaks, for information leaks in those cases can lead to disastrous consequences.

Obviously, Bromberg didn't want to understand any of it, or he simply couldn't. He became fixated on his strife to remove all

barriers to propagating scientific information. He had a fantastic temperament and inexhaustible energy. His contacts in the world of science were innumerable, and as soon as he heard that somebody somewhere had to turn their promising results in for conservation, he fell into a fit of animal rage and wanted to uncover, accuse, and disclose.

There was absolutely nothing that could be done about him. He accepted no compromises, so it was impossible to negotiate with him; he accepted no defeats, so it was impossible to win against him. He was as much out of anyone's control as a cosmic cataclysm. But it seems that even the purest and most abstract idea needs a specific point of application. And for him, COMCON-2 in general and the Excellency in particular have become just such a point, a concrete embodiment of the powers of darkness and evil, against which he was fighting. "COMCON-2!" he hissed venomously, facing the Excellency up close and then suddenly retreating, "You and your Jesuit ways! You took a commonly known abbreviation, the Commission for Contacts with Other Civilizations! How noble, how elevated! Glorious! And you hid behind it your fetid operation! Commission for Control, you see! A command of conservatives, that's what you are! A company of conspirators!"

Over the last half-century, he has been an immeasurable nuisance to the Excellency, and, as far as I understand, nuisance is just the word to describe it; just like a biting fly of a persistent mosquito. Of course, he was unable to harm our cause in any meaningful way. That was way out of his power. But it was well within his power to make all kinds of noise, to distract, to disturb, to write caustic letters, to insist on strict adherence to all formalities, to alert the public to the dominance of bureaucracy, in other words, to tire into oblivion. I wouldn't be surprised if it turned out that twenty years ago, the Excellency dove into the bloody mess of Saraksh mainly because he wanted to be away from Bromberg, if only for a short time. I was especially feeling for the Excellency because the Excellency, not only a man of principles, but also totally committed to fairness, fully realized that, apart from its form, Bromberg's activity served a social purpose; it provided a way to control the controllers.

As to the venomous old man Bromberg, he was seemingly devoid of any notion of fairness and thus summarily dismissed our work, considered it harmful, and hated it hotly and sincerely. The forms

this hatred took were so odious, the man's very manners so unbearable, that the Excellency, with all his cold blood and superhuman self-control, completely lost face and turned into a feisty, stupid, and angry screamer every time he found himself face to face with Bromberg. "You are an ignorant lightweight!" he now wheezed, "You are a parasite living off the blunders of giants! You are incapable of inventing a pasta sauce, but think yourself able to judge the future of science! You only discredit the cause you claim to uphold, you purveyor of cheap jokes!"

It looked like the old guys have not met face to face for a while, and now they were pouring onto each other their supplies of venom and bile with especial vehemence. The sight of it was in many respects educational, although it did contradict the widely believed notions of the innate kindness of a human being and the proud nature thereof. They even didn't look like human beings; instead, they resembled a pair of old mangy fighting roosters. For the first time, I realized that the Excellency is a very old man.

However, despite its lack of aesthetics, this spectacle released an avalanche of truly priceless information. Many allusions I simply didn't understand; they probably concerned cases long since closed and forgotten. Some of the stories mentioned I knew well. But there were a few things that I heard and understood for the first time.

I found out, for example, what Operation Mirror was. It turns out it was the code name for a global drill rehearsing the rebuff of an invasion from without (supposedly, by the Wanderers) held about forty years ago. The full knowledge of the operation was limited to very few, and millions of people who participated in it had no idea they did. Despite the precautions, as it almost always happens in undertakings of global scale, a few people died. One of the people managing the operation and one in charge of keeping it secret was the Excellency.

I found out how the case of The Ugly started. It is well known that Jonathan Pereira voluntarily stopped his work in theoretical eugenics. When the World Council conserved this area, it was following his recommendations. It turned out that our dear Bromberg first sniffed out, and then passionately blabbed the details of Pereira's theory. As a result, five extremely talented daredevils from the Schweitzer Laboratory in Bamako began, and almost completed, their experiment with a new version of *Homo super*. The story with the androids I more or less knew before, primarily

because it is generally cited as a classic example of an unsolvable ethical problem. However, I was curious to find out that Dr. Bromberg does not believe the androids' case to be closed. The "subject or object" problem, in his opinion, doesn't exist in this case. He doesn't care about the secret of identity of the scientists who worked on androids, and as to the androids' rights to the secret of identity, he thinks it nonsense and catachresis. All details of this story must be publicized as a lesson to future generations, while the work on androids must continue...

And so on.

Among stories I've never heard about before, there was one that captured my attention. The conversation turned to an artifact they sometimes called the sarcophagus, and sometimes, the incubator. This sarcophagus-incubator was in their arguments somehow linked to the "detonators," seemingly those same detonators that Bromberg came to find, now resting on a workbench in front of me, covered with a flowery shawl. The detonators, however, were only mentioned in passing, although often; the core of the argument concerned "the smoke screen of disgusting secrecy," which the Excellency supposedly constructed around the sarcophagus-incubator. As a result of this secrecy, Dr. So-And-So, who obtained some unique insight into anthropometry and physiology of the Cro-Magnon man (what in the world does the Cro-Magnon man have to do with this business?), was obligated to withhold it from publication, thereby slowing down the development of paleoanthropology. Another Dr. So-And-So, who figured out the principle on which the sarcophagus-incubator operated, got himself into an ambiguous and embarrassing situation, as the scientific community ascribes the discovery of that principle to him. As a result, he left science altogether and now paints mediocre landscapes.

I perked up. The detonators were somehow related to the mysterious sarcophagus. Bromberg came here to see the detonators. The Excellency put the detonators out as a lure for Lev Abalkin. I doubled my attention, hoping that in the heat of the argument, the old guys would let something else slip, and I would finally learn something substantial about Lev Abalkin. But I have learned that substantial only after they calmed down.

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Lev Abalkin Meets Dr. Bromberg

They calmed down simultaneously, as if they both suddenly ran out of steam. They fell silent. They stopped drilling into each other with fiery stares. Bromberg, puffing, took out an old-fashioned handkerchief and began to wipe his face and neck. The Excellency, looking away from Bromberg, reached inside his jacket (for the gun? I thought, scared), pulled out a vial, rolled a small white spherical pill onto the palm of his hand, and put it under his tongue. Then he held the vial out to Bromberg.

“Not a chance!” Bromberg announced, demonstratively turning away.

The Excellency continued to hold the vial out. Bromberg looked at it sideways, like a rooster. Then he said emphatically, “Dare to take poison from a sage’s hand, but from a fool refuse an antidote.”

He took the vial and rolled another white pill onto the palm of his hand.

“I don’t need this!” he announced and threw the pill into his mouth. “Not yet anyway...”

“Isaac,” the Excellency said and smacked his lips. “What are you going to do when I die?”

“Dance a cachucha,” Bromberg said gravely. “Don’t say stupid things.”

“Isaac,” the Excellency said, “why did you need the detonators? Wait, don’t start it all over again. I have no intention to interfere in your personal affairs. If you developed an interest in the detonators last week or next week, I would never ask you this question. But you wanted to look at them tonight, when a completely different person was supposed to come for them. If this is simply an unlikely coincidence, just say so and we will part ways. My head is hurting...”

“And who is it that was supposed to come for them?” Bromberg asked suspiciously.

“Lev Abalkin.”

“Who is he?”

“You don’t know Lev Abalkin?”

“Never heard of him.”

“I believe you,” the Excellency said.

"Indeed!" said Bromberg arrogantly.

"I believe you," said the Excellency, "but I don't believe in coincidences. Look, Isaac, is it really that difficult to tell me, simply and without grimacing, why you came for the detonators tonight as opposed to some other time?"

"I don't like the word 'grimacing!'" Bromberg said angrily, but without the former enthusiasm.

"I take it back," the Excellency said.

Bromberg started wiping again.

"I have no secrets," he announced. "You, Rudolph, of all people, know that I hate any and all secrets. It is you who put me into a position where I have no choice but to grimace and jest.

Meanwhile, the story is really simple. This morning, someone came to see me... Do you necessarily need a name?"

"No."

"Well, it was a young man. What we talked about is irrelevant, I believe. It was fairly personal. But as we talked, I noticed that he had a peculiar birthmark over here." Bromberg pointed his finger to the inside of his right elbow. "I even asked him if it was a tattoo. You know Rudolph, studying tattoos is a hobby of mine. No, he said, it was a birthmark. It looked like the letter 'Zhe' in Cyrillic, or the sanju hieroglyph; it means thirty in Japanese. Does it remind you of anything, Rudolph?"

"It does," the Excellency said.

It reminded me of something as well, something recent, something I thought both strange and immaterial at the same time.

"Have you figured it out right away?" Bromberg asked enviously.

"Yes," the Excellency said.

"I haven't. The young man has long since left, and I kept sitting there trying to recall where I could have seen this ideograph... And not just a similar one, but the exact same shape. Finally it dawned on me. I had to check, can't you see? Not a single reproduction within reach. I run to the Museum; the Museum is closed..."

"Mak," the Excellency said, "would you be so kind to hand us that thing from under the shawl?"

I obeyed.

The bar was heavy and warm to the touch. I put it on the table in front of the Excellency. The Excellency moved it closer to himself, and now I could see that it is indeed a case of a well-polished amber-colored material, with a barely noticeable straight line

separating the slightly convex lid from the massive base. The Excellency tried to lift the lid, but his fingers slid and it just wasn't happening.

"Allow me," Bromberg said impatiently. He pushed the Excellency aside, picked up the lid with both hands, lifted it up and put it aside.

So this is what they called the detonators. Round gray blobs, about three inches in diameter, laid in a single row, each in its own socket. There were eleven detonators; there were also two empty sockets, and I could see that their bottoms were lined with whitish lint that looked like mold, and the fibers of that lint moved barely noticeably, as if they were alive. Well, they probably were alive in some sense.

But first, I noticed the fairly complicated ideographs imprinted on the detonators' surface, one on each, all different. They were large, pinkish-brown, and slightly washed-out, as if drawn in colored Indian ink on damp paper. One of them I recognized right away; the slightly washed-out stylized letter "Zhe," or, if you will, the Japanese hieroglyph sanju, a small original, whose enlarged copy graced the reverse side of the first sheet in the paper file number 07. That detonator was third from the left, and the Excellency, pointing to it with his long finger, said,

"This one?"

"Yes, yes," said Bromberg impatiently, pushing his hand aside.

"Don't stand in the way. You don't understand..."

He dug his fingernails into the edges of the detonator and carefully started to sort of screw it out of its socket, murmuring as he went, "It's not that... Do you really think I could get that confused? Not a chance..." Finally, he pulled the detonator out of its socket and started lifting it up above the case; I could see how thin whitish threads stuck to the bottom of the thick gray disk stretch and break one by one. When the last one broke, Bromberg turned the disk over, and in the mass of stirring semi-translucent fibers, there was the same hieroglyph, only black, small, and very sharp, as if finely cut into the gray material.

"Yes!" Bromberg said triumphantly, "That's the one. I knew it, I couldn't be mistaken."

"Mistaken in what?" the Excellency asked.

"Size!" Bromberg said. "Size, details, proportions. You see, his birthmark doesn't just look like this ideograph; it is identical..." He

looked at the Excellency closely. "Look, Rudolph, a favor for a favor. Have you marked them all?"

"Of course not."

"So they had it from the beginning?" Bromberg asked, tapping the inside of his right elbow with his finger.

"No. The signs began to appear on them between ten and twelve years of age."

Bromberg carefully screwed the detonator back into its socket and fell into an armchair with a happy expression on his face.

"Well," he said, "I seem to have figured it all out. So, Mr. Polizei-President, what is the value of all your secrecy? I have his number, and as soon as the sun hits the tops of those architectural abominations of yours, I will call him, and we will talk... And don't you even try to talk me out of it, Sikorsky!" he shouted. "He came to me on his own volition, and I, on my own, with this old head of mine, figured out who he is, and now he's mine! I didn't try to steal your lousy secrets! A little luck, a little brain work..."

"All right, all right," the Excellency said. "Godspeed. No objections. He is yours, see him, talk to him. But, please, only to him. No one else."

"Well..." Bromberg drawled with sarcastic doubt in his voice.

"Actually, do what you wish," the Excellency said suddenly. "It's not important now... Tell me, Isaac, what did you two talk about?" Bromberg put his hands together on his stomach and twiddled his thumbs. The victory he won over the Excellency was so great and significant that he, without a doubt, could afford to be magnanimous.

"The conversation, I must admit, was somewhat chaotic," he said.

"Now, of course, I understand that the Cro-Magnon was just messing with my head..."

So this morning (no, make it yesterday morning), a young man, approximately forty to forty-five years of age, came to see him and introduced himself as Alexander Dymok, an agricultural automatics configurator. Medium height, very pale face, dark straight hair-like that of a Native American. He complained that for many months, he is trying, unsuccessfully, to find out the circumstances of his parents' disappearance. He presented Bromberg with a mysterious, and in that devilishly compelling, story, which he supposedly put together clue by clue, sometimes finding clues in the least reliable rumors. Bromberg has the story written down to the last detail, but

telling it now is probably unnecessary. Actually, the visit by Alexander Dymok had only one purpose; could Dr. Bromberg, the world's foremost expert on the forbidden science, shed some light on this story?

Bromberg the foremost expert immediately dove into his files, but found nothing about Mr. and Mrs. Dymok. The young man was visibly upset and was about to leave, when he had an idea. It is possible that the name of his parents wasn't Dymok at all. It is equally possible that the story he put together has nothing to do with reality. Perhaps, Dr. Bromberg could recall if there were any mysterious (and subsequently forbidden for publication) events around the time Alexander Dymok was born (February of 36), as he lost his parents when he was one or two years old...

Bromberg the expert reached into the files again, but this time, chronologically. Between 33 and 39, he found eight relevant incidents, including the episode with the sarcophagus-incubator. He and Alexander Dymok carefully went over each incident and came to the conclusion that none of them could have anything to do with the fate of Mr. and Mrs. Dymok.

"So, I, being the old fool I am, concluded that fate gave me a gift of a story that at the time completely escaped my attention. Can you see? Not one of your lousy prohibitions, but a disappearance of two biochemists! Now that was something I would never forgive you, Sikorski

!" For another two hours, he drilled Alexander Dymok, demanding that he recall the slightest details, including any, even the most ridiculous, rumors, got him to promise that he would undergo the deepest mental scan, so for the last hour or so the young man desperately wanted to get out...

At the very end of the conversation, Bromberg accidentally noticed the "birthmark." The birthmark, seemingly irrelevant to the problem at hand, somehow got stuck in Bromberg's mind. The young man has long since left. Bromberg sent a few queries into the GWI, talked to two or three specialists regarding Mr. and Mrs. Dymok (to no avail), but the damn ideograph got stuck in his head. First, Bromberg was positive he had seen it somewhere before; second, he couldn't help but think that the ideograph, or something related to it, was mentioned during his conversation with Alexander Dymok. Only after replaying the conversation in his mind phrase by phrase, he finally made the connection to the sarcophagus,

recalled the detonators, and took a wild guess as to who Alexander Dymok might really be.

His first impulse was to call the boy and tell him that the mystery of his origin has been uncovered. But his innate scholarly ethics required him to be certain, to exhaust alternative interpretations. He, Bromberg, has seen even more striking coincidences. So he called the Museum...

"I see," the Excellency said gravely, "Thank you, Isaac. So now he knows about the sarcophagus..."

"And why shouldn't he know about it?" Bromberg perked up.

"Indeed," the Excellency said slowly, "Why shouldn't he?"

The Secret of Lev Abalkin's Identity

On 21 December 37, a group of Pathfinders led by Boris Fokin landed on a rocky plateau on a nameless planet in the EN9173 to inspect the ruins (detected all the way back in the last century) of structures thought to be built by the Wanderers.

On 24 December, the intravision mapping detected a substantial hollow within the rock, three meters deep underground.

On 25 December, Boris Fokin, on the first attempt and with no complications, reached the hollow. It was hemisphere-shaped, ten meters in radius. The inside of the hemisphere was lined with amberine, a material very common in the Wanderers' civilization, and contained a bulky device, which one of the Pathfinders christened the sarcophagus.

On 26 December, Boris Fokin asked the proper department within COMCON for permission to study the sarcophagus in situ and received the permission.

Working, as was his custom, with exhausting method and care, he fiddled with the sarcophagus for three days. During that time, he managed to date the find (40 to 45 thousand years before present), detect the sarcophagus' consumption of energy, and trace the links between it and the ruins on top of it. Right there and then, a hypothesis was advanced (and subsequently confirmed) that the "ruins" are not in fact ruins, but an element of a vast system covering the entire surface of the tiny planet, design to capture all kinds of energy, of both planetary and cosmic origin, including seismic waves, fluctuations of magnetic fields, weather, light of the central star, cosmic rays, and who knows what else.

On 29 December, Boris Fokin contacted Komov directly and asked for the best embryologist available. Komov, naturally, asked for an explanation, but Fokin avoided providing one and instead suggested that Komov arrive in person, and by all means accompanied by an embryologist. A long time ago, Komov worked with Fokin, and his impression of him was rather unflattering. So he chose not to go, but sent an embryologist nevertheless, although the embryologist was not the best available, but rather one who was available on the shortest notice. His name was Marc van Blercom. Subsequently, Komov repeatedly regretted that decision, as Marc van Blercom turned out to be a good pal of the infamous Isaac P. Bromberg.

On 30 December, Marc van Blercom arrived to join Fokin's outfit and in a few hours sent to Komov, via an unsecured channel, an astonishing report. In that report, he claimed that the so-called sarcophagus is nothing but a fairly elaborate embryo storage device. Stored in that device were thirteen fertilized eggs of *Homo sapiens*; all appeared viable although remaining in a latent state.

Two people have to be given credit here, Boris Fokin and Gennady Komov, a member of COMCON. Fokin somehow intuited that the find must be kept under wraps, so van Blercom's message was the first and the last unsecured one in the group's communications with Earth. Therefore, the whole story amounted only to a tiny blip in the mass media, and with no follow-up, attracted virtually zero attention.

As to Komov, he not only understood the essence of the problem, but also somehow worked out a range of its consequences. First, he asked Fokin and van Blercom to double-check their findings, and once the confirmation arrived, he called a meeting of COMCON members who also were the members of the World Council. Among them were such superstars as Leonid Gorbovsky and August-Johann Bader, the young and impulsive Kirill Alexandrov, careful and always doubtful Mahiro Shinoda, and the always-energetic Rudolph Sikorski, then sixty-two years of age.

Komov told the meeting about the find and asked them a blunt question: what is to be done? An obvious option was to close the sarcophagus, leave things the way they were, and limit future involvement to passive observation. Another option was to initiate the development of the eggs and see what comes out of it. Finally, there was the option of destroying the find in order to avoid complications in the future.

Needless to say, Gennady Komov, a man of substantial experience, understood full well that this emergency meeting would not solve the problem; nor would a dozen of subsequent meetings. His deliberately bunt statement pursued the sole goal: to shock the participants into a discussion.

Clearly, the goal was attained. Of all participants, only Leonid Gorbovsky and Rudolph Sikorski remained visibly calm. Gorbovsky did because he was an intelligent optimist; Sikorski, because he was the leader of COMCON-2. A lot of words were uttered, excitedly or calmly, flippant or deep, long since forgotten or those that were to become the stuff of reports, legends, presentations, and

recommendations. As was to be expected, the only decision made by the meeting was to reconvene the following day in greater numbers, drawing on other members of the World Council, experts in social psychology, education, and media.

Throughout the meeting, Rudolph Sikorski remained silent. He did not feel he was competent enough to advocate any particular solution to the problem. However, his experience in experimental history, as well as everything he knew about the Wanderers, led him to one conclusion: whatever decision the World Council eventually makes, it, along with the circumstances of the case, must be indefinitely confined to a circle of individuals with the highest levels of social responsibility. To that extent, he proposed at the end of the meeting, "The decision to leave things be and passively observe is not in fact a decision. There are only two true decisions, to destroy or to initiate. It is not important when any of these decisions is going to be made, tomorrow or hundred years later, but neither of the decisions is satisfactory. To destroy the sarcophagus means to commit an irreversible action. We all know what the cost of irreversible action is. To initiate means to play along with the Wanderers, whose intent we, to put it mildly, don't understand. I am not trying to advocate either decision; moreover, I believe I don't even have the right to vote on this. The only thing I ask and insist on is, please allow me to take measures against information leaks. If for no other reason, then only to avoid our drowning in the ocean of incompetence..."

This little speech made some impression, and the permission sought was unanimously given, especially because everyone understood that there is no reason hurry, while conditions for steady and thorough work are absolutely necessary.

On 31 December, the expanded meeting took place. Eighteen people were present, including the World Council Chairman for Social Problems invited by Gorbovsky. Everyone agreed that the sarcophagus was found accidentally and therefore prematurely. Everyone further agreed that before making any decision, it is necessary to understand, or at least imagine, the Wanderers' plan. Several more or less exotic hypotheses were stated.

Kirill Alexandrov, known for his anthropomorphic views, surmised that the sarcophagus is a store of the Wanderers' DNA. All known proofs of the Wanderers' non-humanoid nature, he said, are indirect. In reality, the Wanderers could be genetic doubles of

humans. This supposition does not contradict any of the established facts. Based on this, Alexandrov recommended to stop the investigation, return the find to its initial state, and abandon the EN 9173 system.

In the opinion of August-Johann Bader, the sarcophagus is indeed a DNA store, except the DNA in question is not Wanderers', but humans'. Forty-five thousand years ago, the Wanderers, allowing for the theoretical possibility of genetic degeneration of the then-sparse tribes of *Homo sapiens*, tried to take measures towards restoration of the human race in the future.

The elderly Park Khin spoke under the same motto, "let's not think badly of the Wanderers." He, just like Bader, was convinced that we are dealing with a store of human DNA, but he believed that the intent of the Wanderers is rather educational. The sarcophagus is a time capsule of sorts, which, when opened, will allow the people of the Earth to learn more about the appearance, anatomy, and physiology of their distant ancestors.

Gennady Komov framed the question more broadly. In his opinion, any civilization that achieved a certain level of development cannot avoid the desire to contact other sentient beings. However, a contact between humanoid and non-humanoid civilizations, if at all possible, is extremely difficult. Could we be dealing with an attempt to employ a new way of contact by creating an intermediary being, a humanoid in whose genotype certain characteristics of non-humanoid psychology could be encoded? In that sense, we must view the find as the beginning of a new age, both in the history of Earth and in the history of the non-humanoid Wanderers. In Komov's opinion, the eggs must be immediately initiated. He, Komov, is not reading much into the apparently premature timing of the find; the Wanderers, in their estimates of human development timeline, could easily be off by a few hundred years. Komov's hypothesis provoked a lively discussion, during which the doubt in the ability of modern educational system to raise individuals whose psyche is substantially different from humanoid was first sounded.

Simultaneously, the most careful Mahiro Shinoda, a major expert on the Wanderers, asked a perfectly reasonable question: why is dear Gennady, along with some other colleagues, is so certain about the Wanderers' good intentions toward the people of the Earth? We have no evidence of the Wanderers' capability of good intentions

toward anyone, including humanoids. Just the opposite, the facts (as few of them as there are) suggest that the Wanderers are rather ambivalent to other sentient beings and tend to view them as means to their own ends, rather than partners in contact. Doesn't dear Gennady think that his hypothesis could well be developed in the direction opposite to one he proposed? More specifically, it could be argued that the hypothetical intermediary beings must, as the Wanderers intended, perform tasks that we would perceive as rather damaging. Why, following dear Gennady's logic, can we not assume that the sarcophagus is, so to speak, an ideological time bomb, while the intermediary beings are saboteurs of sorts, designed to infiltrate our civilization. A saboteur, of course, is an odious term. But we have recently begun to use a new term, Progressor, a human from the Earth, whose work is to maintain peace among other humanoid civilizations. Why can we not assume that the hypothetical intermediary beings are the Wanderers' Progressors of sorts? What, at any rate, do we really know about the Wanderers' opinion of the pace and forms of our own, human progress?

The meeting immediately broke into two factions, the optimists and the pessimists. The optimists sounded more plausible. Indeed, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to imagine a super-civilization capable of tactless experimentation on younger brothers in intelligence, not to mention a brute-force aggression. Given the existing knowledge of the trends in intelligence development, the pessimists' viewpoint appeared, to put it mildly, baseless and archaic. On the other hand, there was always a chance, even if very small, that there was some error in reasoning. The optimists could be misinterpreting the facts. More importantly, the Wanderers themselves could be mistaken. The consequences of those mistakes for the fate of the humankind could not be estimated nor controlled.

Just then, Rudolph Sikorski for the first time imagined an apocalyptic picture of a being anatomically and physiologically indistinguishable from a human (moreover, indistinguishable from a human in terms of logic, emotions, and the view of the world), living and working among humans, while carrying within it an unidentified program, unknown even to the being itself, even as the program turns on, destroys the human mind and leads the being—Where? To what goal? And just then, Rudolph Sikorski realized

with hopeless clarity that no one, and least of all he, Rudolph Sikorski, has the right to ignore the possibility by downplaying the odds.

In the middle of the meeting, Gennady Komov was handed the latest dispatch from Fokin. He read it; his expression changed, and he said in breaking voice, "Bad news; Fokin and van Blercom report that all thirteen eggs just began to divide."

This was a troublesome New Year for all involved. A meeting of the spontaneously formed "incubator commission" commenced in the early morning 1 January and ran virtually uninterrupted until the evening of 3 January. The sarcophagus was now called the incubator, and almost the only matter discussed was the fate of the thirteen citizens-to-be.

The option to destroy the incubator was no longer discussed, although all members of the commission, including those who advocated the initiation of the eggs earlier, felt out of place. They couldn't shake the anxiety; they felt that on 31 December they in some sense lost their independence and were forced to follow a plan devised by outsiders. The discussion, however, was constructive.

It was then that the guiding principles for raising the yet-to-be-born children were defined, their nurses, observing physicians, teachers and possible mentors identified, and the related research program devised in broad strokes. Several experts in xenotechnology in general and in the Wanderer technology in particular were immediately dispatched to join Fokin's group to assist in the careful study of the sarcophagus-incubator, to help avoid any "awkward moves," and most importantly, to attempt to find in the design of the machine some clues that could help in detailing the plan of working with the "stepchildren". Even the approaches to shaping the public opinion in the event of each hypothesis of the Wanderers' intent coming true were worked out.

Rudolph Sikorski took no part in the discussion. He listened very inattentively, and his attention was focused on taking down the names of everyone who in any way participated in the unfolding events. The list grew at a depressingly fast pace, but he understood that at the moment nothing can be done about it; one way or another, a lot of people will be drawn into this strange and dangerous story.

In the evening of 3 January, at the final meeting, after the wrap-up and the official formation of the sub-commissions that emerged

spontaneously, he asked to speak and delivered a speech along the following lines.

We did a lot of good work here and prepared as well as we could given the information we had and the dead-end situation in which we found ourselves unwittingly, by the Wanderers' design. We agreed not to do anything irreversible, and this, essentially, is what our decisions are all about. However, as the leader of COMCON-2, the organization responsible for the security of the Earth's civilization, I would like you to agree to several requirements that all of us would follow in this line of work.

First, all research that is in any way related to this story must be classified. It must not be disclosed under any circumstances. The legal basis for this is found in the secret-of-identity laws.

Second, none of the Stepchildren must be made privy to the circumstances of their birth into this world. The legal basis, see above.

Third, the Stepchildren, as soon as they are born, must be separated; in the future, steps must be taken to ensure that they neither know anything about each other nor see each other. The basis for this lies in some rather obvious concerns, discussing which at this point would be a waste of time.

Fourth, all of them must be trained to work away from the Earth, so that their very professional lives would keep them from returning to the Earth even for short periods of time. The basis for this is the same elementary logic. So far, we were forced to go where the Wanderers wanted us to go, but we must do everything we can to eventually (the sooner the better) be able to get off that path.

As was to be expected, Sikorski's four requirements were received unfavorably. The meeting's participants, just as all normal people, were averse to secrets, classified research, lies by omission and whatever other tricks COMCON-2 might have had up its sleeve. But Sikorski correctly foresaw that after they let out the emotional steam, the psychologists and sociologists in the room would get a grip and take his side. The secret-of-identity laws are no joke. It is easy to realistically imagine a string of the most unpleasant situations that could arise, were the first two requirements not set forth. Imagine the mind of a human who not only knows that they were born into this world out of an incubator built forty-five thousand years ago by mysterious creatures for an unknown purpose, but also realizes that everyone else knows about it. With a

little imagination, they could eventually conclude that in spite of their human upbringing and their undying love for the Earth, their very existence could constitute a threat for the human race. This conclusion could cause a mental trauma that even the best specialists would not be able to handle.

The psychologists' arguments were backed up by the unexpected and unusually harsh statement by Mahiro Shinoda, who bluntly said that everyone was thinking too much about the thirteen unborn children and too little about the threat they could pose for the Earth. As a result, the four requirements were accepted by the majority vote, and Rudolph Sikorski was put in charge of developing and implementing the required measures. And just in time, too.

On 5 January, Rudolph Sikorski got a call from a slightly worried Leonid Gorbovsky. It turns out that Gorbovsky had a conversation with an old friend of his, a xenologist from Tagora who for the last two years was accredited at the Moscow University. During the conversation, the Tagoran, seemingly out of pure curiosity, asked whether the recent news of the find in the EN9173 system was confirmed. Unexpectedly hit with this innocuous question, Gorbovsky started to mumble something unintelligible to the extent that he has long since got out of the Pathfinder work, that this is outside of the area of his interests, that he is not aware of what might have transpired, and finally, with relief and complete sincerity, announced that he had not read the dispatch in question. The Tagoran immediately changed the subject, but Gorbovsky nevertheless ended up with a very unpleasant aftertaste.

Rudolph Sikorski thought that this conversation would have a follow-up. And he was right.

On 7 January, he had an unexpected visitor, a professional colleague from Tagora, His High Honor Dr. As-su, who just arrived to Earth. The purpose of his visit was to discuss a number of important matters having to do with the planned scope expansion of Tagoran official observers on Earth. After the business was attended to and the tiny Dr. As-su proceeded to have his favorite Earth drink (cold barley coffee with synthetic honey), the high-ranked parties began to trade historical anecdotes, amusing and horrifying, which was something they enjoyed immensely every time they got together.

In particular, Dr. As-su mentioned that one hundred and fifty years

ago, as the foundation for the Third Great Machine was being laid, the Tagoran construction workers found something in the basalt shield of the Circumpolar Continent. In Earth terms, it could be described as an ingeniously designed holding tank containing two hundred and three Tagoran larvae in a latent state. The age of the find was impossible to determine, but it was clear that the holding tank was put in place long before the Great Genetic Revolution, back when each Tagoran went through a larvae stage in its development.

"Amazing," Sikorski mumbled. "Did your people really had this kind of technology back in those times?"

"Of course not!" Dr. As-su replied. "It was definitely the work of the Wanderers."

"But why would they do it?"

"That question is too hard to answer. We didn't even try answering it."

"So what happened to those two hundred of little Tagorans?"

"Hmm... You are asking a strange question. The larvae began to develop spontaneously, and we, of course, immediately destroyed the device and all its contents. Can you imagine a race that would do otherwise in this kind of situation?"

"I can," Sikorski said.

The very next day, 8 January 38, the High Ambassador of United Tagora departed to his home planet due to health issues. Within a few days after that, there was not a single Tagoran on Earth or on any other planet where humans lived or worked. In about a month, all humans working on Tagora were asked to return to Earth. All contact with Tagora ceased for twenty-five years.

...They were all born on the same day, 6 October 38; five girls and eight boys, well-built, loudly screaming, completely healthy human babies. By the time of their arrival, everything was ready. Their birth was attended to by the best obstetricians, members of the World Council, and consultants to the Commission of the Thirteen. The babies were given a thorough checkup, washed, wrapped into warm blankets and delivered to Earth the same day on a specially equipped spaceship. By the end of the day, caring nannies fussed over the thirteen orphans and posthumous children at thirteen nurseries scattered across all six continents. The children would never see their parents again, so from now on they all had one mother, the enormous and enormously kind human race. The

legends of their background were developed by Rudolph Sikorski and, with the permission of the World Council, entered into the GWI.

The fate of Lev Abalkin, along with those of his “siblings,” was now programmed for many years ahead, and for many years, it was in no way different from those of hundreds of millions of his Earth-born peers.

In the nursery, he, as babies do, first lied down, then crawled, then stumbled, then ran. He was surrounded by other babies and cared for by caring adults; everything was just like it was in hundreds of thousands of nurseries across the planet.

Hi did, however, get lucky. On the day he was delivered to his nursery, a new observing physician began to work there. Her name was Yadviga Lekanova, and she was one of the world’s foremost experts in child psychology. Whatever the reason, she wanted to step down from the shining heights of pure science and return to what she used to do several decades ago. When at age six Leo Abalkin was transferred, along with the rest of his group, to boarding school number 241 in Syktyvkar, Dr. Lekanova thought that now she might like to work with schoolchildren and requested a transfer to that same school.

Leo grew up and developed unremarkably; he was prone to melancholy and introversion, but whatever deviations from his personality type he exhibited were well within the normal range and far away from extremes. Physically, he was also unremarkable. He was neither excessively sickly nor extremely strong. All in all, he was a well-built, healthy, normal boy, who stood out among his mostly Slavic classmates only because of his straight raven-colored hair, which he was very proud of and always wanted to grow to shoulder length. And so it went on until November 47.

On 16 November, during a regular checkup, Dr. Lekanova found a small swollen bruise inside Leo’s right elbow. A bruise on a boy is no rare occurrence, so Dr. Lekanova ignored it and would have forgotten all about it, but a week later, on 23 November, she found that the bruise has not disappeared but transformed. Actually, it was no longer a bruise; now it looked like a tattoo, a small yellowish-brown pictograph resembling a stylized Russian letter “zhe”. Friendly questions posed to the boy revealed that little Leo didn’t have a clue as to what it was and where it came from. It was obvious that he simply didn’t notice that something just happened

on the inside of his right elbow.

After some deliberation, Dr. Lekanova reported her little discovery to Dr. Sikorski. Dr. Sikorski took it down with no apparent interest, but in late December he suddenly called Dr. Lekanova and asked how Leo's birthmark was doing. No change, said Dr. Lekanova, surprised. If you would, asked Dr. Sikorski, could you please take a photograph of that birthmark without the boy noticing and send it to me?

Lev Abalkin was the first of the Stepchildren to develop a birthmark inside his right elbow. Over the next two months, eight other Stepchildren developed elaborately shaped birthmarks. The circumstances were absolutely identical: first, a swollen bruise with no painful sensations; a week later, a yellowish-brown pictograph. By the end of 48, all thirteen wore "the Wanderers' brand." Next came the amazing and somewhat scary discovery, which brought about the term "detonator".

It is impossible to determine who coined the term. In Sikorski's opinion, it perfectly captured the essence of the problem. All the way back in 39, a year after the Stepchildren were born, the technicians decommissioning the now-empty incubator found in its bowels an elongated amberine box containing thirteen gray disks marked with pictographs. Since the bowels of the incubator contained many articles more mysterious than this case, no one paid any special attention to it. The case was transferred to the Museum of Extraterrestrial Cultures, cataloged in the classified inventory as a "unit of life support system," withstood languid probing by some researcher attempting to figure out what it was and what it could be used for, and finally booted over to the already overflowing Sector of Items of Unknown Purpose, where it was quietly forgotten for ten years.

In early 49, Rudolph Sikorski's assistant in the Stepchildren's case (let's say his name was Ivanov) walked into his boss' office and laid on his desk a projector turned to page 211 of the sixth volume of the sarcophagus inventory. The Excellency took one look and froze. It was a photograph of "life support unit 15/156a": thirteen gray disks nesting inside the amber-colored case. Thirteen elaborate pictographs, whose meanings he long since gave up pondering, very familiar from the thirteen photographs of the insides of thirteen children's elbows. One pictograph per elbow. One pictograph per disk. One disk per elbow.

This could not have been a coincidence. It had to mean something. Something very important. Rudolph Sikorski's first instinct was to immediately retrieve the "unit 15/156a" from the Museum and hide it in a vault. Away from everyone. Away from himself. He got scared. Just like that. And the scariest part was, he didn't even understand why he was scared.

Ivanov was scared, too. They looked at each other and understood each other without saying a word. They had the same picture in their minds; thirteen bombs, tan and scratched, screaming with delight, swim in rivers and climb trees all over the globe, while here, thirteen matching detonators wait for their time to come. That, of course, was a moment of weakness. Nothing scary actually happened. Nothing suggested that the disks are detonators to bombs or activating devices for hidden programs. It's just that people got used to expecting the worst when it came to the Stepchildren. But even if their imagination was correct, even in that extreme case, nothing major has happened yet. The detonators could be destroyed at any time. At any time, they could be withdrawn from the Museum and sent far away, to the edge of the inhabited Universe and if necessary, beyond that edge.

Rudolph Sikorski called the curator of the Museum and asked for the item number such and such to be transferred into the custody of the World Council and delivered to his office. The reply was a slightly surprised, impeccably polite, but nevertheless unambiguous refusal. It turned out (and Sikorski had no clue about it) that items displayed in a museum, any museum, are not transferable. Not to private individuals, not to the World Council, not even to God himself. If God himself needed to work with the item number such and such, He would have to arrive to the museum in question, present proper credentials, and do His research within the museum's walls, while the museum would gladly provide any necessary laboratory equipment, specialist advice, and so on and so forth.

This was an unexpected turn of events, but the initial shock had already worn off. If nothing else, it was good to know that in order to reunite with its detonator, a bomb would at the very least need "proper credentials." Moreover, it was well within Sikorski's powers to turn the Museum into a vault, only a bigger one. And what the hell? How would the bombs know where the detonators are, or that they exist in the first place? No, that really was a moment of

weakness, one of the few in his life.

The detonators were then studied further. A select circle of experts, with proper credentials and recommendations, conducted a series of well-designed studies in the Museum's well-equipped laboratories. The outcome of those studies could well be described as zero, except for one strange and tragic event.

One of the detonators was tested for regeneration. The test was negative; unlike many other Wanderers artifacts, detonator number 12 (pictograph "Gothic M") has not rebuilt itself after destruction. Two days later, a group of schoolchildren from the Templado Boarding School was caught in a mountainside slide in Northern Andes. There were twenty-seven boys and girls led by a teacher. Many sustained concussions and wounds, but all made it out alive, except Edna Lasco, case file number 12, pictograph "Gothic M." Needless to say, it could have been a coincidence. But the detonator research was nevertheless suspended, and the World Council has later banned it altogether.

There was another incident, much later, in 62, while Rudolph Sikorski, aka Wanderer, was the resident agent in charge on Saraksh.

Exactly because Sikorski was not on Earth, a group of psychologists, members of the Commission of the Thirteen, secured permission to partially disclose the secret of identity to one of the Stepchildren. Selected for the experiment was Korney Yashmaa, case file number 11, pictograph "Elbrus." After thorough preparation, he was told the truth about his origins. Only his. Nobody else's.

At the time, Korney Yashmaa was about to graduate from the Progressor School. His medical files revealed a man with extremely stable personality and very strong will, quite an exceptional person in the making. The psychologists were right. Korney Yashmaa received the information with striking composure; it seems that the outside world was of far greater interest to him compared to the mystery of his own origins. The psychologists' careful warning about the possibility of a hidden program residing within him, possibly designed to direct him to act to the detriment of the human race, had no upsetting effect on him. He openly admitted that he understands the potential danger but doesn't believe it to be imminent. He willingly agreed to regular self-observation, including daily run of an emotion indicator; further, he offered to undergo a mental scan, as deep as necessary. In a word, the Commission had a

reason to be pleased; at least one of the Stepchildren became a willing and strong ally of the Earth.

When Rudolph Sikorski found out about it, he got very angry at first, but eventually decided that in the end, the experiment could be useful. He didn't want the Stepchildren to know what they are and what is happening to them when (and if) the program launches. He would prefer that they made sudden moves, not knowing what they seek, inevitably doing nonsensical and strange things. But for control purposes, it could be useful to have one (but no more!) of the Stepchildren aware of his origins. If the program indeed exists, it must be organized in a way that the mind can't overcome.

Otherwise, the Wanderers' effort would be wasted. But there was no doubt that the behavior of a person aware of the program would be radically different from the others' behavior.

However, the psychologists didn't even think to stop. Encouraged by their success with Korney Yashmaa, three years later (while Rudolph Sikorski was still stuck on Saraksh as the resident agent in charge) they repeated the experiment with Thomas Nielson (case file number 02, pictograph "Slanted Star"), a ranger at a nature preserve on Gorgona. The indications were good, and for a few months Thomas Nielson continued to work as usual, seemingly unperturbed by the secret of his identity. He generally was rather reserved and unemotional.

He carefully followed the recommended procedures of self-observation, taking his predicament with a grain of his trademark heavyweight humor, although he did refuse to undergo a mental scan, citing purely personal reasons. And on the one hundred and twenty-eighth day of the experiment, Thomas Nielson died on Gorgona under the circumstances possibly indicating suicide.

It was a severe blow for the Commission and especially for the psychologists. The elderly Park Khin announced his resignation from the Commission, left behind his research institute, his students, even his family, and went into a self-imposed exile. And on the one hundred and thirty-second day, the COMCON-2 agent whose job description included, among other things, a monthly inspection of the amber case, reported in panic that the detonator number 02, pictograph "Slanted Star," has disappeared without leaving as much as a speck of dust in its socket lined with tiny moving fibers of pseudo-epithelial.

By then, the existence of some, to put it mildly, semi-mystical link

between the Stepchildren and their respective detonators was beyond doubt. Equally beyond doubt was that the human race would be unable to figure out the meaning of this story in the foreseeable future.

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The Discussion of the Situation

The Excellency told me this and much more on the same night, when we returned to his office from the Museum.

It was dawn when he finished his story. When he stopped talking, he got up and went to make coffee without looking at me.

“You can ask your questions,” he grumbled.

By then, I was overwhelmed by a single emotion, a profound, limitless regret over knowing all this and having to participate in it. If I were a normal person, leading a normal life and doing a normal work, I would perceive this story as one of those urban legends, both fantastic and frightening, that emanate from the edge between the familiar and the unknown, reach us distorted beyond recognition, and have the wonderful quality of having nothing to do with our Earth full of light and warmth and no impact on our daily lives. In those legends, everything always ends up fixed by someone somewhere, or in the process of being fixed, or on its way to be fixed in the nearest future.

Unfortunately, I was not a normal person in that sense of the word. I was one of those who were to fix anything that could be dangerous to the human race and progress. This is why people like me sometimes end up in other worlds playing the roles of alien characters. Such as the role of an Imperial officer in a feudal empire on Saraksh once played I understood that I would carry this secret with me for the rest of my life. That when I learned this secret, I accepted yet another responsibility which I didn't ask for and which, let's face it, I didn't need. That from now on I would have to make decisions, meaning that I must understand whatever has been understood before me, and, ideally, more than that. Which in turn meant sinking into this secret (which was as disgusting as all our secrets are if not more so), sinking into it even deeper than I have sunk up to this point. Somewhat childishly, I was thankful for the Excellency, who until the last moment tried to keep me on the edge of the secret. Even more childishly, I was almost capriciously annoyed with him for failing to keep me out of it. by Lev Abalkin.

“Do you have any questions?” the Excellency asked.

I snapped out of it.

“Let's be logical,” the Excellency put little cups on the table,

carefully poured coffee and sat down. "Tristan was his observing physician. Every month, they would meet in the jungle somewhere, and Tristan would conduct a physical. Supposedly, to monitor the Progressor's stress level; in reality, to make sure Abalkin remains human. On the whole planet of Saraksh, Tristan alone knew the number for my emergency channel. On 30 May, 31 at the latest, I was to get a triple-seven message from him, meaning, things are in order. Instead, on 28, the day of the physical, he died. And Lev Abalkin escaped to Earth, went into hiding, called me on my emergency channel, which only Tristan knew." He drained his coffee in a single swallow and fell silent, chewing on his lip. "I think you didn't understand the most important thing, Mak. We are not dealing with Abalkin; we are dealing with the Wanderers. Lev Abalkin is no more. Forget him. We are approached by the Wanderers' robot." He fell silent again. "To be honest, I have no idea what force could make Tristan give out my number to anyone, least of all to Lev Abalkin. I am afraid he wasn't just killed..." "So you assume the program is driving him to search for his detonator?"

"I have nothing else to assume."

"But he has no idea the detonators exist. Or was that Tristan, too?"

"Tristan didn't know anything. And Abalkin doesn't know anything, either. The program does!"

I said,

"Please understand what I am trying to say, Excellency. Don't think I am trying to soften or minimize... But you haven't seen him. You haven't seen people he talked to. I understand everything; Tristan's death, the escape, the call to your emergency channel, the hiding, the contact with Glumova who is in charge of the detonators. It looks very straightforward. A perfect chain of reasoning. But there is more! He meets with Glumova, and not a word about the Museum; only childhood memories and love. He meets with his teacher, and all he has is a grudge: the teacher supposedly ruined his life. He talks to me, another grudge: I supposedly stole his priority... By the way, why would he meet with the teacher at all? Seeing me is understandable; say, he wanted to find out who is tracking him down... But why the teacher? Then there was Schekn; the request for asylum is so downright foolish that it doesn't fit into anything!"

“It does, Mak. Everything fits. There’s the program, and there’s his mind. He doesn’t understand what’s happening to him. The program requires him to act inhumanly, and the mind is trying to transform the requirement into something that makes any sense at all... He runs back and forth, he acts strangely and nonsensically. I expected something like this... That’s why we needed the secret of identity; now we have a little time on our hands... As to Schekn, you just didn’t get it. There was no request for asylum. The Bigheads felt he was no longer human, so they were demonstrating their loyalty to us. That’s what happened there...”

He didn’t convince me. His logic was almost flawless, but I saw Abalkin, I spoke to him, I saw the teacher and Maya Glumova, I spoke to them. Abalkin was indeed running back and forth. He did act strangely, but his actions were not nonsensical. There was a goal behind them, only I couldn’t figure out what it was. Also, Abalkin was pitiful, not dangerous...

But that was only my intuition, and I knew what intuitions are worth. In our business, intuitions are a dime a dozen. Not to mention that intuitions are based on human experiences, while we are dealing with the Wanderers...

“May I have some more coffee?” I asked.

The Excellency got up and went to make another serving.

“I can see you’re doubtful,” he said, his back turned to me. “I would doubt, too, if only I had the right. I am an old rationalist, Mak, I’ve seen a lot, I’ve always started off with reason, and reason never let me down. I can’t stand all these fantastic tricks, all those mysterious programs put together by someone we don’t know forty thousand years ago, which supposedly turn themselves on and off based on who knows what principle, all those mystical extra-spatial connections between the living souls and the stupid blobs hidden in a case... This whole thing makes me want to throw up!”

He brought back the coffee and poured it into cups.

“If you and I were common scientists,” he went on, “and simply studied a certain natural phenomenon, I would be delighted to call all this a chain of freak coincidences! Tristan died in an accident; he wasn’t the first to do so, and he won’t be the last. Abalkin’s childhood friend turned out to be the keeper of the detonators, accidentally. Abalkin called me by accident; he misdialed the number trying to call someone else... I swear, this highly improbable chain of highly improbable events would seem more

plausible then the idiotic, talentless theory of this Beelzebub of a program, supposedly embedded into human fetuses... To scientists, it's all clear: do not invent entities unless absolutely necessary. But you and I are not scientists. A scientist's mistake is ultimately his personal business. We, however, should not make mistakes. We can afford to be regarded as ignorant, mystically minded, superstitious fools. There is only one thing we would not be forgiven for, and that's underestimating the danger. And if our house all of a sudden smells like sulfur, we have no right to start reasoning about molecular fluctuations; we have to admit that a horned devil appeared nearby and take all measures necessary, up to organizing industrial production of holy water. And thank God if it turns out to be a fluctuation; the whole World Council will laugh at us, and so will every schoolchild..." He irritably pushed away his cup. "I can't drink this coffee; nor can I eat, for four days now..." "Excellency," I said, "Why are you so tense? Why does it have to be a horned devil? After all, what do we know about the Wanderers that's so bad? Take Operation Dead World for example... They saved the population of the entire planet, no more no less! Billions of people!"

"Are you consoling me?" the Excellency said grinning darkly, "Mind you, they weren't saving the population. They were saving the planet from its population! And very successfully... And where the population went, we are not to know..."

"Why the planet?" I asked, confused.

"And why the population?"

"All right," I said, "but that's not the issue. Let's say you're right; the program, the detonators, the horned devil... So what can he do to us? He's just one man."

"Boy," the Excellency said, almost tenderly, "you thought about it for about half an hour; I've been wrecking my brain over it for forty years now. And I wasn't alone. And the worst thing is, we've thought up nothing. And never will, because even the smartest and the most experienced of us are just humans. We don't know what they want. We don't know what they can do. And we'll never know. The only hope is that in all our movements, convulsive and disorderly, we will do things they did not anticipate. They could not have anticipated everything. No one can. And still, every time I decide to do something, I catch myself thinking, it's possible they expected exactly this, this is exactly what I shouldn't do. I, the old

fool that I am, have gone as far as being glad that we didn't destroy that damned sarcophagus right away, on the first day... The Tagorans did, and now look at them! That horrible dead end they are facing... Maybe this is the consequence of that reasonable, rational act they committed a century and a half ago... But, on the other hand, they don't think themselves to face a dead end! It's a dead end from our, human viewpoint! In their opinion, they prosper and thrive, and they surely think that they have those who made that timely radical decision to thank for it... Or look at us; we decided to keep the mad Abalkin away from the detonators. And maybe this is exactly what they expected from us?" He put his bald skull into the palms of his hands and shook his head.

"We are all tired, Mak," he said. "We all are so tired! We can't even think about it anymore. We are so tired that we get careless and begin to say to each other, 'Nah, it'll blow over!' Gorbovsky used to be in the minority; now, seventy percent of the Commission subscribes to his beetle-in-an-anthill theory... That would have been beautiful! I so want to believe in it! Some smart adults, acting out of scientific curiosity, dropped a beetle into an anthill and are now carefully recording the nuances of ant psychology and fine details of their social organization. Meanwhile, the ants are scared; they fuss about, they get emotional, they are getting ready to die to protect their home, and they have no idea that eventually, the beetle would crawl off the anthill and go his own way, no harm done to anyone... Can you imagine, Mak? No harm done! Don't fuss about, ants! Everything is going to be fine... But what if this is not a beetle in an anthill? What if this is a ferret in a henhouse? Do you know what it is, Mak, a ferret in a henhouse?"

Then he exploded. He hit the tabletop with both fists and screamed, staring at me with his mad green eyes,

"Bastards! They have crossed forty years out of my life. For forty years, they're making me think like an ant! I can't think of anything else! They made me a coward! I jump when I see my own shadow, I don't believe my own talentless head... What, what are you looking at? Forty years later, you will be just like me, and maybe even sooner, because the events will begin to accelerate! Everything will happen in a way which we, the old guys, didn't even suspect, and the bunch of us will retire, because we won't be able to handle it. And everything will pile up onto your

generation! And you won't be able to handle it, either! Simply because you-"

He fell silent. He no longer looked at me; instead, he looked over my head. He slowly started to rise from behind his desk. I turned around.

Standing in the doorway by the open door was Lev Abalkin.

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Lev Abalkin in Person

“Leo!” the Excellency said in a surprised and touched tone of voice. “My God! How are you, buddy? We’ve been looking for you all over the place!”

Lev Abalkin moved, and suddenly he was right by the desk. No doubt, he was a true Progressor of the new school, a professional, and probably one of the best; I had to expend quite a bit of effort only to keep him in my perception tempo.

“You are Rudolph Sikorski, the head of the COMCON-2,” he said in a quiet and surprisingly colorless voice.

“Yes,” the Excellency replied, smiling jovially. “But why so officially? Have a seat, Leo...”

“I shall speak standing up,” said Lev Abalkin.

“Come on, Leo, why the ceremonies? Please have a seat. We have a lot to talk about, don’t we?”

“No, we don’t,” said Abalkin. He didn’t even look at me. “We don’t have a lot to talk about. I don’t want to talk to you.”

The Excellency looked stunned.

“What do you mean, you don’t?” he asked. “You, my dear friend, are a member of a service, you must report. We still don’t know what happened to Tristan... So what do you mean, you don’t want to talk?”

“Am I one of the Thirteen?”

“Damn you, Bromberg...” the Excellency said bitterly. “Yes, Leo. Unfortunately, you are indeed one of the Thirteen.”

“Am I forbidden to be on Earth? Do I have to spend my entire life under observation?”

“Yes, Leo, that’s the case.”

Abalkin had great self-control. His face was motionless, his eyes were half-closed, as if he was napping on his feet. But I could feel that standing in front of us is a man boiling with rage.

“Anyway, I am here to say,” Abalkin said in the same quiet and colorless voice, “that what you did to us was stupid and vile. You broke my life and still didn’t get what you wanted. I am on Earth and have no intent to leave it again. Please keep in mind that I will no longer tolerate your observation and I will get rid of it mercilessly.”

“Just like you got rid of Tristan?” the Excellency asked casually. Abalkin, it seemed, had not heard him.

“You’ve been warned,” he said. “Whatever happens from now on is your responsibility. I intend to live the rest of my life the way I see fit; please do not interfere in my life again.”

“All right. We won’t interfere. But tell me, Lev, did you not like your line of work?”

“From now on, I will be choosing my line of work.”

“Very well. Wonderful. And when you have time off work, please use your brain and imagine yourself in our place. What would you do with the Stepchildren?”

Something like a grin crossed Abalkin’s face.

“There is no room for thinking,” he said. “Everything is obvious. You had to tell me everything, make me your conscious ally-”

“Only to see you commit suicide in a couple of months? It’s scary, Leo, to feel like you are a threat to the human race; not everyone can live with it...”

“Nonsense. This is what psychologists think. I am a man of Earth! When I found out I am forbidden to live on Earth, I almost went nuts! Only androids are forbidden to live on Earth. I ran forth and back, like a madman, looking for ways to prove that I am not an android, that I was a child once, that I worked with the Bigheads... You were afraid to drive me insane? Well, you almost succeeded!”

“And who said you are forbidden to live on Earth?”

“Is it not true, then?” Abalkin inquired. “Perhaps I am allowed to live on Earth?”

“Now, I don’t know... Possibly. But look at it from our perspective, Leo! On the entire planet of Saraksh, only Tristan knew that you should not return to Earth. And he couldn’t have told you that. Or did he actually tell you?”

Abalkin was quiet. His face remained motionless, but on his pale cheeks, gray spots began to show through, like scars from old blemishes; now he looked like a Pandean dervish.

“Oh well,” the Excellency said after a pause. He was ostentatiously staring at his fingernails. “Let’s say Tristan told you everything. I don’t understand why he would do it, but let’s say he did. Why, then, didn’t he tell you the rest? Why didn’t he tell you that you are a Stepchild? Why didn’t he explain the reasons behind the prohibition? There were reasons, and they were substantial, whatever you may think about it...”

A slow spasm went over Abalkin's gray face, and suddenly it lost its firmness and slacked; his mouth opened slightly, eyes opened widely, as if in amazement, and for the first time, I heard him breathe.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said loudly and hoarsely.

"Too bad," the Excellency said. "It's very important to us."

"To me, only one thing is important," Abalkin said. "To make sure you leave me alone."

His face firmed up again, the eyelids came down, gray spots slowly began to disappear off his pale cheeks. The Excellency changed the tone.

"Leo. Of course we will leave you alone. But I implore you, if you suddenly feel something unusual... Some strange thoughts... If you simply fall sick... Please let someone know. Anyone, it doesn't have to be me. Gorbovsky, Komov, even Bromberg..."

At that point, Abalkin turned his back to him and went toward the door. The Excellency almost screamed, stretching his hand toward him,

"Immediately, please! Immediately! While you're still human! I may have done you wrong, but it's not Earth's fault!"

"I'll let you know," Abalkin said over his shoulder. "You personally."

He went out, carefully closing the door behind him.

For a few seconds, the Excellency stayed quiet, clutching the armrests of his chair and listening to the ambient noises. Then he commanded quietly,

"Follow him. Whatever happens, don't lose him. Keep contact through the bracelet. I'll be at the Museum."

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Case Closed

After he exited the COMCON-2 building, Lev Abalkin slowly walked down the Red Maples Street, stepped into a public videophone booth, and spoke to someone. The conversation lasted a little over two minutes, after which Lev Abalkin, still in no hurry, hands clasped behind his back, turned into the boulevard and settled on a bench next to the bas-relief of Strogov.

It looked like he carefully read everything carved into the stone of the pedestal; then, he looked around, and for the next twenty minutes, sat on the bench in a pose of a man resting after hard work: he spread his arms on top of the back of the bench, threw back his head, and stretched his crossed legs out into the alley. A group of squirrels gathered around him; one jumped onto his shoulder and poked its head at his ear. He laughed loudly, scooped the squirrel up in the palms of his hand, drew his feet closer bending his legs, and put the squirrel onto his knee. I think he talked to it. The sun just came up; the streets were almost empty; there was not a single person on the boulevard except him.

I had no illusions about remaining unnoticed. I was sure he knew I was watching him, and he must have at least some idea about how to lose me if necessary. But I wasn't concerned about that. I was concerned about the Excellency. I did not understand what his plan was.

He ordered me to find Abalkin. He wanted to see Abalkin, to talk to him one-on-one. At least that's what the plan was in the beginning, three days ago. Then he came to the conclusion (more precisely, forced himself to conclude) that Abalkin must be looking for the detonators. Then he put the ambush in place, and there were no plans for *tête-à-tête* anymore. There was the order, "When he touches the scarf, take him." There was also a pistol. Seemingly, to be used if the taking didn't work out. Very well. Now Abalkin comes to see him on his own accord. And it is clearly visible that the Excellency has nothing to say to Abalkin. No surprise there; the Excellency is convinced that the program is working, in which case talking to Abalkin is a waste of time. (I had my own opinion as to whether the program was actually working, but it wasn't important. The important thing was to understand the Excellency's plan.) So he let Abalkin go. Rather than apprehending him right there in

his office and handing him over to physicians and psychologists, he let him go. There is a threat to Earth. To thwart it, isolating Abalkin would be sufficient. That could be done by very simple means. That would be enough to at least close this case. But he let Abalkin go and headed to the Museum himself. This could only mean one thing: he is absolutely sure that Abalkin will appear in the Museum shortly. For detonators. What else for? (You'd think the problem has a simple solution: stick that amber case into a decommissioned Ghost and send it into the sub-space until the end of time... Unfortunately, this could not be done; that would have been an irreversible act.)

So Abalkin comes to the Museum (or fights his way into it; Grisha Serosovin is still waiting for him there)... He comes to the Museum, and finds the Excellency there. That would be a sight to behold. Then the real conversation takes place...

The Excellency will kill him. God save us all, I thought in panic. He is sitting here playing with squirrels, and in an hour, the Excellency will kill him. This is as simple as a turnip. The Excellency is waiting for him at the Museum to understand, to see with his own eyes how everything happens, to see the Wanderers' robot find its way around, locate the amber case (by sight? by smell? by sixth sense?), open the case, pick out its detonator... And the second it becomes clear what it intends to do with the detonator, the Excellency will pull the trigger, because the risk is too big.

Hell no, I said to myself, that's not going to happen.

I can't say I thought through my course of action. Frankly, I haven't. I simply came into the alley and went straight for Abalkin.

When I came close, he cast me a sideways look and turned away. I sat next to him.

"Leo," I said. "Leave this place. Immediately."

"I thought I asked you to leave me alone," he said in the now-familiar quiet and colorless voice.

"You won't be left alone. It's gone too far. No one doubts you personally. But to us, you are no longer Lev Abalkin. Lev Abalkin no longer exists. To us, you are a Wanderers' robot."

"And to me, you are a gang of idiots driven mad by their fears."

"No question about it," I said, "but this is exactly why you need to get away from here as far as possible as soon as possible. Go to Pandora, Leo, stay there a few months, prove that there is no program running inside you."

"But why?" he said. "Why do I have to prove anything to anyone? It's demeaning, you know."

"Leo," I said, "If you saw some scared children, would you find it demeaning to playact in front of them just to calm them down?" For the first time, he looked me in the eye. It was a long unblinking look, and I realized that he doesn't believe a single word I said. Sitting next to him was an idiot driven insane by his fears; he was trying his best lie to convince him to go to the end of the Universe and stay there forever, with no hope of return.

"It's hopeless," he said. "Stop blabbing and leave me alone. I have to go now."

He carefully waved the squirrels away and got up. I got up too.

"Leo," I said. "You will be killed."

"Well, that's not particularly easy to do," he said casually and started walking along the alley.

I walked next to him. I kept talking. I talked all kinds of nonsense; this is no time for a grudge, it is stupid to risk one's life out of pride, let's have some consideration for the old guys who lived the last forty years on pins and needles. He responded with silence or veiled insults. A couple of times, he actually smiled; my behavior seemed to amuse him. We came to the end of the alley and turned onto Lilac Street. We were walking toward Star Square.

There were quite a few people on the street now. This was not a part of my plan, but it wasn't a big obstacle, either. People do faint on the streets; when that happens, someone should get the unconscious person to a doctor... I will take him to our launch pad, it's not far, he won't even have time to regain consciousness. There are always two or three spare Ghosts sitting around. I will call Glumova, tell her to get there, and the three of us will land on the green Ruzhena, in my old camp. Along the way, I will explain everything to her, and Lev Abalkin's secret of identity can go to hell... Well, here's a glider I can use, right there at the curb.

Available. Just what I need...

When I came to, my head was resting in the warm lap of an elderly woman I didn't know. I felt like I was on the bottom of a well; unfamiliar concerned faces looked down on me, someone was saying that they shouldn't crowd and give me some air, someone else stuck a sharply smelling vial under my nose, and a self-assured voice was saying something to the extent that it's not necessarily a big problem; people do faint on the streets...

My body felt like a balloon hovering just above the ground with a quiet sound of hollow ringing. There was no pain. Looks like I got hit with the most common turndown, although it was struck from a very uncommon position.

“Well, he’s conscious now, he’s going to be okay...”

“Please stay down, you just fainted briefly...”

“The doctor is coming; you friend went to get you a doctor...”

I sat up. People held me by my shoulders. The hollow ringing inside was still there, but my head has cleared completely. I had to stand up, but so far, it was more than I could accomplish. Through the fence of legs and bodies surrounding me, I could see that the glider is gone. At least Abalkin wasn’t able to do exactly what he intended. Had he struck two centimeters to the left, I would be out of it until evening. But he missed, or maybe my defensive reflexes acted out at the last moment...

With a whistling swish, a glider touched down; a lanky man cut through the crowd, inquiring on the go, “What happened here? I am a doctor! What is the problem?”

I suddenly found my legs, got up, grabbed the doctor’s sleeve, and pushed him toward the elderly woman who was just holding up my head and who was still on her knees.

“There’s something wrong with the lady; please help her...”

My tongue was barely controllable. In the ensuing silence, I got to the glider, tumbled overboard onto the seat, and turned on the engine. The last thing I could hear was an excuse-me of surprise and protest, and the very next moment I was looking at Star Square basking in morning sunlight.

Everything seemed to be happening in a recurring dream. Just like it did six hours ago. I ran from room to room, from hallway to hallway, winding between displays, among statues and mockups that looked like ugly mechanisms and mechanisms and automatons that looked like ugly statues, only now everything was brightly lit, and I was alone, and my legs were soft, and I was not afraid to be late, because I was sure I am late already.

I am late already.

Already.

A shot rang. A not-so-loud, dry shot of a Herzog. I stumbled. That’s it. The end. I kept running, channeling what little energy I had left into it. To my right, I caught a glimpse of a figure clad in a white lab coat between the ugly shapes. Grisha Serosovin, aka Aquarius.

Also late.

Two more shots, one after another... "Leo, you will be killed."

"That's not particularly easy to do..." We burst into Maya

Glumova's workshop simultaneously, Grisha and I.

Lev Abalkin was lying in the middle of the workshop on his back;

the Excellency, huge, hump-backed, holding a pistol in the

outstretched hand, was carefully approaching him in small steps.

From the other side, holding on to the edge of a workbench with both hands, Glumova was approaching.

Glumova had a fixed, ambivalent expression on her face; she appeared unnaturally cross-eyed.

The Excellency's saffron-colored bald spot and his slightly droopy cheek turned to me were covered with big drops of sweat.

There was a sharp, acrid, and unnatural smell of burnt gunpowder.

And it was quiet.

Lev Abalkin was still alive. Fingers of his right hand powerlessly and stubbornly scraped the floor, as if trying to reach the gray disk

of the detonator, only a centimeter away. Bearing a sign of either

stylized letter "Zhe" or the Japanese hieroglyph sanju.

I stepped over to Abalkin and squatted beside him (the Excellency crowed something that sounded like a warning). Abalkin's glassy

eyes stared into the ceiling. His face was covered in gray spots

again; there was blood on his lips. I touched his shoulder. The

bloody lips moved, and he said,

"The beasts came in and stood by the door..."

"Leo," I called out.

"The beasts came in and stood by the door..." he repeated

stubbornly. "The beasts came in..."

Maya Glumova screamed.

The end